



## **Caribbean Conference on Higher Education**

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### **Roadmap for Partnering for Sustainability: Call to Action to take the Higher Education and Research Agenda Forward**

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#### **THE *UNICA* LEGACY**

The birth of UNICA in 1967 coincided with the attempts by political leaders in the English-speaking Caribbean to rescue the concept of regional cooperation from the failed Federation attempt of the former British colonies. UNICA was unique in that in its definition of the Caribbean it included, irrespective of linguistic and cultural differences, all countries which were embraced or caressed by the Caribbean Sea. Thus, in addition to the English speaking countries it encompassed higher education institutions in countries such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Curacao, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Guyana, Venezuela and Colombia. Today membership has been extended to institutions in Aruba, Suriname, Saint Marten, the Caribbean Research Centre of the Medgar Evers College in New York and as far afield as the Caribbean Studies Centre of the London Metropolitan University.



It is worth noting that in its definition of Caribbean, UNICA pre-dated by more than two decades the emergence of groupings such as CARIFORUM in 1994 (a grouping of the independent English and Dutch speaking states which form the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) with the Dominican Republic and Haiti and which functions principally as a mechanism for the coordination of the European Union's development aid to the group under the Lome IV Convention) and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) formed in 1996 in which UNICA is a 'social actor'. UNICA therefore stands as an early example of initiatives designed to unite the region and promote collaboration and partnerships.

UNICA's aim has been to foment cooperation and collaboration among higher education institutions to help promote the economic, social and cultural development of the region. Over the years a number of projects have been undertaken, such as the founding of the Association of Caribbean universities, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) a vibrant regional association which functions independently of UNICA, and the Caribbean Student Exchange Programme to facilitate student exchange among member institutions.

The annual UNICA conference provides an opportunity to highlight specific topics of interest to Caribbean academics. For its most recent Conference and Annual General Meeting held March 15 -16 on the St Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies, the theme chosen was "Partnering for Sustainability'", driven by the particular circumstance of Haiti whose tertiary sector, like every other sector in Haiti, was victim of the devastation wreaked by the catastrophic earthquake in January 12 this year. Representatives from the Université d'Etat d'Haiti, Université Quisqueya, Université Caraïbe and Université Notre Dame d' Haiti were invited for the purpose of sharing information on the prevailing situation at their institutions in the wake of the earthquake and that of the tertiary sector generally in Haiti and the gaps created. By collectively addressing Haiti, the expectation was that the Conference and meetings would give UNICA members and other participants the opportunity to strengthen partnerships and



reaffirm the important role of UNICA in the sustainable development of the Caribbean region.

Areas addressed were:

- Partnering for Sustainability: The Urgency of Haiti
- Call to Action for UNICA to Partner with Haiti for the Rebuilding of its Tertiary Sector
- Roadmap for Sustainable Partnerships with the Tertiary Sector in Haiti
- Positioning UNICA to Play a Decisive Role in Strengthening the Tertiary Sector in the Caribbean.

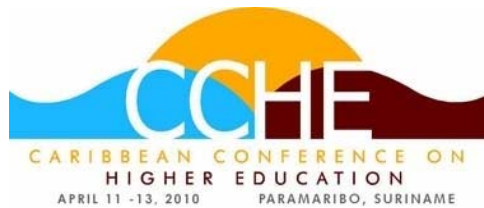


Colleagues ...knowledge, research and innovation are critical components of the development agenda of any region. In the Caribbean, countries are placing increased emphasis on developing knowledge-based economies that bolster their economic diversification and sustainable development agendas. We believe that an Association such as UNICA is well-poised to play a significant role in harnessing the region's talent and to work in tandem with the international community.

The desirability of increased responsiveness of the tertiary sector to societal needs and greater contribution to the priority areas of sustainable development at the national, regional and global levels, such as the environment, energy, technology and innovation, has been reiterated at many forums. In this regard, UNICA considers that it should be more proactive in:

- mobilizing university associations, universities and research institutes to partner for increased mobility, cooperation and exchange
- identifying a broad range of beneficial cooperation and exchange schemes in line with the missions of those associations, universities and research institutes
- the promotion of the design of a comprehensive regional policy framework whereby inter-institutional cooperation and partnerships are seen as a way of promoting internationalization and a means of building teaching and research capacity, strengthening quality assurance and developing curricula that are responsive to the needs of students and take account of societal demands.

UNICA will also seek to encourage dialogue on possible new objectives and priorities for UNICA in today's tertiary education environment. We will be discussing specific ways in which UNICA could make a more significant contribution to sustainable development in the Caribbean. Likely areas will include (but are not limited to) teaching, research, innovation, advisory services, capacity-building, public-private partnerships and community engagement.



UNICA will propose strategies for increasing its relevance and responsiveness as a regional association in order to play a more prominent role in guiding and supporting the regional development agenda and the well-being of its member institutions.

Some strategies identified for promoting partnerships for enhanced collaboration and cooperation are to:

- identify/map research pillars, mission priorities and technical expertise of institutions
- construct a regional data base of interests, needs and strengths to support inter- and intra-regional partnerships . In this regard, the UWI technical expertise data base in progress would be extended to map the strengths of other UNICA member institutions.
- build capacity and systems for sound proposal writing in institutions in order to develop collaborative proposals for funding
- promote institution and industry partnerships
- encourage language training to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing.

The value of inter-institutional partnerships among UNICA members for effective collaboration for enhanced capacity and development should not be underestimated. In this regard, the urgency of the action for Haiti will fast track the collaboration and cooperation being contemplated and the funding support being mobilized. This action for Haiti can be used to effectively galvanize efforts common to institutions and agencies to form partnerships which hopefully will be sustained. The multiple forums where specific needs are brought to the fore, helps to earmark the nature of the collaboration required to make the rebuilding effort of their tertiary sector a sustainable one.



In helping Haiti, we help ourselves. The general regional applicability of some of the proposed collaborative interventions to the expressed needs of colleague members from Haiti at the UNICA conference in March, is evident:

- The development of hazard maps to facilitate the suitable design and planning of rebuilding efforts (Haiti has an association of professional engineers which should be contacted and involved in any effort towards reconstruction).
- Assistance with the development of a public awareness education programme to provide information to the Haitian society about natural disasters and how their effects can be mitigated. This can be done via distance education or online media.
- Collaboration in the delivery of Distance/ Multimode Delivery of MSc Training Programmes in Land Planning & Management , placing emphasis on Irregular and Informal Settlements Development
- Design Research Projects and identify research groups and experts to collaborate to address Building Standards and Regulatory Mechanisms; Municipal Management; Governance (with respect to built environment); Water management/ Disasters; Reforestation in upper watersheds; Chemical Reduction in urban energy systems, involving national and municipal agencies.
- Academic teams to join Haitian colleagues to assist in the restart of the academic term.
- Design mechanisms to offer joint and regional programmes, the weighting of course credits; transfer of credits; matriculation requirements; fees; student/staff mobility; and modes of delivery.
- Joint construction teams, utilizing technical expertise from regional HEIs for University buildings, including libraries and laboratories, able to withstand earthquakes.



- Psychological support for students and lecturers to deal with the aftermath of the disaster.
- Reforestation as a priority, moving from reconstruction to reconfiguration of Haiti.
- A pooling of expertise and programme funds for development purposes; Sustainable partnerships are necessary for small states.
- Highlight lessons to be learnt from disaster management.
- Removal of language barrier projects and programmes.
- Development of new online Social Sciences courses. Distance education was identified as an important area requiring attention.
- Public awareness campaign and active engagement necessary.

In efforts such as these, the UNICA Executive will be challenged to

- Lobby governments and be represented at forums.
- Influence alumnae and diaspora generally to contribute to action. UNICA is teaming with the Haitian Studies Association to send academic teams into Haiti
- In the case of Haiti, advocate and assist with the design of a bonding mechanism for Haitian students participating in external programmes to mitigate the impact of brain drain.
- Conduct a skills census to enable skilled Haitians to be involved in the rebuilding process and future platform design and construction; and for unskilled Haitians driven by desire for change, to be trained to be involved in this process.

At the conclusion of the meeting on Haiti, a Communiqué was issued addressing, inter alia, the establishment of a UNICA Task Force for Haiti whose action will be guided by the expressed needs of the tertiary sector in Haiti and will involve the collective body of UNICA. In terms of strategy, one of the first steps would be to attempt, in tandem with



our Haitian colleagues, to be kept informed of assistance efforts so as to avoid duplication. The next step would be to identify the gaps between current assistance and the ongoing needs of Haiti and to compile a matrix mapping needs, response action, UNICA institutions to be involved, timeframe, resources available at UNICA member institutions and funding agencies to be targeted for support. The UNICA Secretariat would serve as the clearing-house in this activity.

The Task Force will identify, rationalise and prioritise the interventions proposed by the participants during the Conference and develop an action agenda for presentation to national, regional and international organisations by April 15, 2010. The Task Force will also co-opt participation from regional and international organisations as required.

We know that the next few steps will be the most important when pledges are transformed into action, providing the building blocks for the renaissance of the tertiary sector in Haiti. To avoid duplication of efforts and to ensure maximum results, UNICA is aligning with CARICOM so that efforts are compatible with the possible sharing of resources.

Action taken by the task Force will be communicated our deliberations to the international institutions drafting the Post Disaster Needs Assessment so that its conclusions could be one of the inputs into the recovery framework being developed at the request of the Government of Haiti.

Generally speaking, as agents of our respective institutions and by extension, our countries and the Caribbean region, we need to promote:

- advocacy in national, regional and international fora for financial support for higher education
- The development of practical interventions to assist our students and faculty
- Support for capacity building interventions to facilitate sustainable development





- In the case of Haiti, the provision of expertise and experience for reconstruction and development efforts based on the needs articulated by the people of Haiti.

It is hoped that the action of UNICA and its partners in the specific case of Haiti can serve as a model for collaboration in providing leadership for sustainable development in the Caribbean as a whole.

I believe that this UNICA collaborative initiative with colleague members in Haiti for the rebuilding of their tertiary sector can provide a good roadmap for other HEI partnerships.

These partnerships can be one of the best investments for our sustainable future, in an arena which is increasingly competitive.

AI, Suriname

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