



## **A Synopsis: OECS Higher Education Conference, March 22-24, 2010**

By Mr. Paul Payne

Principal,

Montserrat Community College,

Montserrat

I am pleased to make this particular contribution at this forum on Caribbean Higher Education, hereby establishing a link with a similar forum that was held in the OECS March 22-24, 2010.

The Conference consisted mainly of presentations and a number of interactive plenary sessions. The presentations and discussions of the Conference occupied almost two and a half days and I now have twenty minutes to try to relate to you the significant elements of that Conference. Firstly, let me admit that it is impossible to have captured the atmosphere of commitment and concern that the presenters brought to the Conference and richness of the follow-up discussions. It is also impossible to convey the details of the eloquent and captivating presentations which gave evidence of the high level of research which the presenters brought to their presentations.

What I will be able to do in my allotted time is to present a sense of the Conference dialogue as encapsulated in the Conference Programme, and then to present a summary of the key issues as challenges related to higher education in the OECS. Then I will summarize some proposed strategies to respond to these challenges, and the proposed response mechanism that will allow the OECS to address these challenges. Fortunately, the concluding session of the Conference, and the conclusions of a Summary Feedback Form by the World Bank, have provided the basis for this final part of my presentation.

### **Context**

The conference was held in the context of the critical importance of higher education in improving growth and competitiveness of the OECS countries in



the global knowledge economy, and in view of the decision by several countries of the region to transition their colleges to universities. The objective of the conference was to agree recommendations for developing the higher education system, which would support OECS countries and make them globally competitive. The conference output would contribute to formulation of a regional education strategy, as mandated by the OECS Authority at their 50<sup>th</sup> meeting in November 2009. This conference was the first of several major activities in the process of developing this new strategy. Participants included Heads of OECS Colleges, Chief Education Officers, Permanent Secretaries and Ministers of the OECS, and representatives of regional institutions.

### Opening session – Framing Perspectives

**Sir Dwight Venner, Governor of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank**, spoke on the conference theme, “Higher **Education and Skills for National and Regional Development.**” He underlined in his key note address that this was a unique time for the Caribbean because of the world shifts prompted by the financial crisis and the current efforts to establish an economic and political region. Despite the dismal statistics on tertiary education in the region, the Caribbean does not have failed states, as do many countries with more years of independence. Venner described the higher education system of the OECS—UWI, community colleges, and online and private education—but emphasized that access remained restricted to the well-to-do and or conveniently located. The current situation is suboptimal: non-campus countries want their own universities and online providers the world over are bringing in unprecedented levels of competition. Reform and change is needed, but “let’s start with the end in mind. We must think about the place a university has in our own countries,” before embarking on a specific path.

He outlined two roads to competitiveness, the high-skilled and the low-skilled path, and recommended the OECS take the former given its small population. This means that going forward; every person should be trained to achieve high economic growth. Since the individual OECS states do not have the critical mass to realize this vision, “we must band together to create the appropriate higher education institutions that enable this transformation.” Prior to the



transformation, the OECS must agree on the type of economy it wants to create: what it will look like, what are its comparative and competitive advantages, and thus what should people study. Veneer suggested the goal for OECS development should be that of one territory, with a free trade area, with many forward and backward linkages, and tourism as its main base. If this is accurate, then the challenge will be to shape tertiary education accordingly.

### **Panel 1 - Higher Education and Labor Market Linkages**

**Dr. Ndhahi Hassan, Senior Specialist, Skills and Employability**, ILO shared regional unemployment statistics (8.3% average, 10.1% female and 16.6% youth), and revisited the conclusions of the CARICOM Commission on Youth Report. The latter highlighted the mismatch between education and employment and the need to reform the education system to cope with globalization and the changing world of work. After a brief review of the ILO's mission and history, Hassan concluded by underlining the need for coordination, cooperation, partnership, and greater linkages between education, training policies and the labor market.

**Mr. Christian Husbands, Representative of the CAIC** gave a private sector perspective on skills and business development, emphasizing the role of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME). He underlined the need to align the region's education systems and their output to the requirements and aspirations of the CSME. Equally important, he touched upon the need to increase the level of skills training, improving quality (need for functioning regional accreditation) and research in order to improve the capacity of the private sector to grow and compete on the global market. He questioned the logic of each country setting up its own university. The expansion of tertiary education he said is a necessity, and it must happen in partnership with private sector.

Discussion:

- Countries do not compete, regions do not compete; firms within them DO compete. We need to think of higher education in their terms if our goal



to increase the competitiveness of our countries and region. Highlighted need for articulating qualifications, ensuring education contributed to increased productivity and competitiveness – not just turning out university graduates.

### **Panel 2 – The Role of Universities in National and Regional Innovation Systems**

**Ms. Stamenka Uvalic-Trumbic from UNESCO** spoke about the new dynamics for higher education and research, and their implications for small states. She highlighted massification due to growing demand for access to higher education, the stresses put on the academic profession, and the diversification of higher education: from world class universities to community colleges, from public to private education, and from classroom learning to e-learning, to open and distance learning. With regards to small states, she underlined the importance of cross-border education, the mobility of people, and the need to take quality assurance from the local sphere to the global sphere. She emphasized the need to change from earlier development trajectories of today's mature higher education systems.

**Prof Wayne Hunte** underlined the importance of research to economic development and competitiveness, the challenges of poorly developed linkage between universities and industry; lack of clear research agenda; capacity limitations; and poorly developed regional and national policies for research. He described the different methods UWI was using to advance research and development across its campuses. These included partnerships, dedicated research groups, and workload policy for research staff, among others. He emphasized the need to create a R&D funding mechanism across the OECS that would fund research competitively (like the NSF).

Discussion:

- The role and funding of R&D investments in light of other more urgent country needs.
- The distributional effects of an R&D regional fund: how does one ensure that one institution does not end up receiving the lion's share of the funding?



- The risk-adverse nature of the Caribbean private sector: if R&D does not pay off in the short term, businesses will be reluctant to support it.
- Emphasis on quality and regional approach.
- Need to build transformative capacity as higher education sector is developed

### **Panel 3 – Issues of Higher Education in Small States**

**Her Excellency Dame Pearlette Louisy** recounted the numerous conferences and reports that had populated the Caribbean higher education space in the last two decades. She highlighted the recurring themes and challenges including: need to restructure governance to allow for greater autonomy, wider national representation and accountability; diversifying funding to reduce over dependence on government; tension between national and regionalism – calling for increased collaboration; and lack of a framework for quality assurance.

**Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie** shared statistics that characterized small states and expanded on the different models that these states had chosen for their higher education. He emphasized the need to coordinate, harmonize and rationalize investments across the OECS higher education space, and warned against the widespread desire to think of buildings and physical structures as the primary method of higher education development and compromising quality. He also recommended thinking in terms of a system rather than about individual country initiatives. Carefully thought through it might be possible to build a world class system in the region even though no country on its own could build a world class university.

Discussion:

- Participants underlined the need to implement and operationalize ideas. There was never a dearth of ideas across the OECS; but the ability to see them through completion was woefully lacking.



- The tension between national and regional interests, and how pursuing one often implied compromising the other. Participants nuanced this position and suggested small states think in terms of enlightened self-interest: helping each other would result in helping themselves.
- Emphasized need to build transformative capacity and increase in use of ICT
- Called for World Bank to provide support to the OECS to truly function as a facilitating body for policy making and to support regional initiatives like building a higher education system; and to support higher education in the same way as what happened for EFA.

#### **Panel 4 – Colleges Transitioning to Universities**

**Mrs. Jacintha Pringle** spoke about the options for the Antigua State College. The college was at a crossroad: remain as is or achieve university status. Although the latter was optimal, the strategy would be to start small, focus on strengths and skills building, and have vocational studies play an important role. They would partner with universities, form alliances with neighboring countries and centers of excellence, and invest in areas they can do well as well as distance education.

**Dr. Geraldine Hodelin** spoke about the challenges of being a state-funded university, and the financial constraints they faced throughout the transition. The latter was particularly acute because as a national entity, UTech's capacity to enter into entrepreneurial, revenue building and other developmental ventures was severely limited by strict Government procurement rules. Going forward, their strategy is to urge staff to earn higher degrees, create partnerships with other educational institutions, and develop niche areas for research, among others.

**Sir John Daniel** of Commonwealth of Learning highlighted the ability of small states to leverage ICT to provide education within borders from beyond borders. Open Education Resources (OER), in conjunction with a transnational qualifications framework, allows small states to produce endogenous content, share that content with others for whom it is applicable, and have their students



earn degrees using the combined knowledge of nations. This type of an education system allows countries to resolve the tension between national and regional interests, and helps them respond to three urgent issues: pressing local demand, training local people for local needs, and giving qualified people professional challenges at home. He emphasized the need for transnational qualifications framework, proper accreditation of courses and bringing together elements of a modern higher education enterprise.

**Dr. Zameer Mohammed** spoke about the UTT experience of transitioning to university status. Three major resource challenges expounded upon included staffing, academic alliances and industrial partnerships. To solve the second, UTT formed alliances with top programs of major universities to help enrich the curriculum and the local programs. To solve the third, UTT formed partnerships with industry in order to guarantee relevance of the education. In terms of R&D, UTT focused exclusively on the sectors with economic relevance and industry partners. This translated into a low volume of research, but a high level of relevance.

#### Discussion:

- Major questions revolved around the cost for students and for universities, particularly when the latter transition into full degree universities. Pointed to financial constraints of colleges in their current status and how this would be amplified by the move to university status. Need for efficiency was highlighted
- Concerns involved student choice when tuition costs at home are comparable with those of better reputation universities abroad. If the costs are indeed comparable, why would students choose to study at home?
- Centrality of quality, and economies of scale with OECS Population just over 500,000
- Leadership and management issues need serious consideration.
- Paralysis of paradigm due to insufficient awareness of alternative models
- Shortage of human resources
- Need for UWI to continue providing a platform





## Conclusion of Panels 1-4

**Dr. Harriet Nannyonjo** summarized the major issues of the day. These included higher education financing, the mismatch between education, employment and national development, the drive for national self-sufficiency as hampering improved collaboration, and issues of quality and the need to avoid degree mills, challenges of scale - viability of institutions associated with small states, critical importance of research – but low funding, low capacity for research and innovation, poor linkage with industry, and governance of higher education institutions. A recurring theme was that the OECS community knew what the important issues were, but not the concrete steps with which to move forward. Key considerations on moving forward included the:

- Need for increased collaboration national, regionally and internationally.
- Need for a strong partnership with the private sector as a provider, funder, employer and in quality assurance.
- Need for quality assurance, accreditation, and articulation of qualifications and regional qualification framework.
- Need to assure the education provided contributed to national and regional development as well as increased competitiveness.
- Need for a specific vision of higher education in the OECS to which all states subscribe and implementation that is related to economies of scale.
- Need for a win-win solution to address national and regional tensions
- Greater use of ICT in delivery of higher education
- Diversity in funding sources
- Building capacity for innovation and research

## Panel 5 – Finding Solutions and Embracing the Future: Challenges and Opportunities

**Dr. Jamil Salmi** spoke about the importance of knowledge and changing education needs and practices. In terms of the latter, tertiary education systems in the future will have online classes, open universities, refunds for unemployed





graduates, e-labs, ipods, and degrees with 5-year validities, among others. Creativity will be the most important characteristic of a student and employee. New skills, lifelong learning, and the ability to learn and unlearn continuously will become the norm. New pedagogical approaches will focus on learning tailored to needs of individuals, and new and varied modalities for learning will include interactive and collaborative learning. Higher education is changing quickly, and we must adapt.

What does this mean for small states? Four challenges will withstand time:

- Quality and relevance: the focus will be on programs that build professional skills and soft competencies, on the measurement of student learning outcomes, and the effectiveness of e-learning.
- Financial sustainability: going forward, the balance between public spending and private contribution will be key, as will be performance-based allocation mechanisms. There will be challenges on the macro level—limited fiscal resources, economies of scale, higher vulnerability to economic fluctuations, and limited number of institutions—and on the institutional level—vulnerability of regional institutions and programs dependent on several countries and a small economic base from which to fund-raise.
- Institutional diversification: on the demand-side, this means the need for various levels of skills, and on the supply-side, the need for a variety of institutional configurations. The pre-requisites for this are close linkages with industry, pathways to allow for mobility across institutions, and avoidance of academic drift.
- Flexibility: this means good feedback mechanisms, strategic planning to orient change, and the ability to react and adapt rapidly.

Small states are in a position to embrace the changes that are revolutionizing higher education and use them to catapult their colleges, universities and technical institutes.

**Dr. Didacus Jules** spoke about the demand and supply challenges of tertiary education in the OECS, the worrying brain drain in the region, the political **hubris** associated with national universities, and the various alternative pathways in



front of the OECS. He emphasized that the fundamental challenge was not size, but rather strategic thinking and innovation. It was not whether the OECS required a stronger, more responsive tertiary education capacity, but how to best provide more access and guarantee higher quality. With regards to alternative pathways, he highlighted the need for an articulated higher education system, a public-private partnership model, a harmonized regulatory framework for tertiary education providers, and a virtual infrastructure that meets the capacity requirements of the region.

He proposed the following principles for a regional framework that respected national requirements:

- Regional framework that respects national requirements - Core access in all national jurisdictions
- Centers of specialization in sub regions
- Institutional integration within and across national borders
- Best practice incorporation of successful 3<sup>rd</sup> party alliances
- Leveraging of distance technologies/ICT
- Teaching excellence

Discussion:

- How can we re-direct the brain drain? Our salaries here are lower than what people can earn abroad. Also, the people in certain professions that remain in the OECS are the ones that weren't "good enough" to go abroad.
- Countries in the OECS are very indebted, and these financial constraints pose serious problems for the expansion of tertiary education.
- The need to instill a sense of urgency throughout the tertiary education community such that concrete action is taken. Otherwise, decisions abroad will determine the future of the region. The region must seize the opportunity and preempt that.

### **Ministerial Roundtable**



Her Excellence Dame Pearlette Louisy: introduced the session, commended the work done thus far, and called on the Ministerial Roundtable representatives from each Member State to make their input.

Anguilla: spoke about the recent opening of the Island's first community college with significant representation from the Chamber of Commerce on the Board to ensure linkage with industry. Financing is a major challenge.

Grenada: highlighted the challenge of increasing access for young learners and of defining a vision for the future, quality and standards to improve competitiveness, also emphasized involvement of the private sector. They requested the Bank to support improved capacity for the OERU to be able to coordinate regional initiatives.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines: mentioned that the Island is using linkages and partnerships to leverage their higher education. They do not imagine moving to a national university anytime soon, and instead will continue their collaboration with UWI. Their challenges are: retaining and retooling lecturers and shortage of funds. They will continue with the UWI partnership and online programs, but will have to work on accreditation. The expectation is that CKLN will help with training of lecturers. They requested the Bank to support improved capacity for the OERU to be able to coordinate regional initiatives.

Antigua and Barbuda: highlighted tension between national institutions and UWI; the need to build on the model of the open campus and virtual university.

Dominica: although they are focusing on higher education, they must also take into consideration what happens at the ECD, primary and secondary systems. They called for a radical change in education system to create a flexible, comprehensive system characterized by excellence: highlighted strong private sector participation and collaboration with UWI.

St. Lucia: high demand for post secondary education; competition of online providers has prompted the Government to upgrade its community college into a full-fledged competitive university. However, financing is a major challenge as government cannot meet the needs of the college in its current form – dilemma is if fees are raised would cost be too high for poor students to afford?



St. Kitts and Nevis: Have a target of 20 percent GER to higher education by 2020; off-shore schools contribute 20% of GDP for St. Kitts and Nevis; highlighted need to increase use of ICT; need to address quality and accreditation; looking to full realization of CKLN; have a plan for a 7 – 10 year timeframe for transforming college into university status; called for strengthening regional capacity, including the Education Unit of the OECS Secretariat to coordinate national with regional initiatives; regional accreditation. He requested the Bank to support improved capacity for the OERU to be able to coordinate regional initiatives.

Montserrat: highlighted the need to pay attention to quality of secondary education as the foundation of Tertiary education and called for use of the UWI model.

### **Summary of the workshop**

Dr. James Fletcher briefly summarized the areas in which action needed to be taken:

- Challenges of scale
- Governance of the OECS higher education system
- Financing of tertiary education
- Collaboration and coordination
- Cross-border provision of education
- Quality assurance and articulation of qualifications across the region
- Requested the Bank to support improved capacity for the OERU to coordinate regional initiatives of this nature.

### **Result of World Bank's Questionnaire**

The World Bank circulated an evaluation questionnaire to allow participants to respond to the following questions, which provided the participants view of the issues and strategies to improve OECS Tertiary Education:

- What are the biggest challenges in the (OECS) education sector in the coming 10 years ?



- What are the major obstacles that stand in the way of meeting these challenges?
- What should the role of the World Bank be in countries that want to strengthen their education institutions and system?
- How can the World Bank best support the generation and dissemination of evidence about education issues?

Responses to the questions were collated as follows:

**What are the biggest challenges in the (OECS) education sector in the coming 10 years?**

- Improving access –Secondary & Tertiary
- Teacher Training & Staff Development;
- Increase use of ICT in education & training;
- Documenting and sharing best practices;
- Initiating Curriculum innovation
- Leveraging resources through
- Establishing strategic alliances and creatively lowering the per student cost of education
- Promoting sustainable funding mechanisms
- Building & expanding managerial capacity

**What are the major obstacles that stand in the way of meeting these challenges?**

- Lack of a comprehensive qualifications framework for teachers;
- Inadequate human & financial resources;



- Insufficient political will;
- Economies of scale;
- Nationalistic myopia;
- Insufficient accountability, combined with a weak research culture.

**What should the role of the World Bank be in countries that want to strengthen their education institutions and system?**

- Provide technical assistance and funding to build, manage, and use information systems;
- Support the OECS Education Reform Unit;
- Fund and provide technical assistance for the establishment s of the regional accreditation mechanism;
- Support institutional collaboration;
- Help countries attract funds for the areas of education that are now a priority and have high unit costs;
- Fund a Think-Tank on the development of a education business model;
- Support the development of a regional strategy for education.

**How can the World Bank best support the generation and dissemination of evidence about education issues?**

- Centralize information and provide a focal point for best practices across the region and the world;
- Help the region understand the value of data and to manage data for decision-making purposes;
- Foster more networking among countries to increase knowledge sharing.



Dr Fletcher concluded his summary presentation by outlining the two next important steps in this process of moving forward from the conference:

- Harmonise existing resources on the ground to increase capacity and delivery impact;
- Establish a small committee to prepare a strategy for higher education in the OECS, which will be submitted to the 51<sup>st</sup> OECS Authority Meeting in June, 2010.

The members of the committee will include:

- Dr. Didacus Jules, Registrar, Caribbean Examination Council.
- Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie, Pro Vice Chancellor, Planning and Development, UWI
- Professor Harvey Miller, Professor of Operations Management, Saint Mary's University, Canada
- Mrs. Nicole Baker, Permanent Secretary for Education, St. Vincent and the Grenadines
- Marcellus Albertin, Head, OERU

We will then allow the collective wisdom of our Ministers of education as guided by the input of the conference to provide the policy framework for advancing higher education in the OECS

Thank you