Background

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has brought about an unprecedented crisis on all fronts. In the area of education, this resulted in massive closures of educational institutions in more than 190 countries around the world in order to prevent the spread of virus and mitigate its impact. According to UNESCO\(^1\), as of late June 2020, 1,089,749,858 learners are affected worldwide by COVID-19 related school closure. Of these, more than 166,552,325 were students from Latin America and the Caribbean\(^2\).

This situation has provoked an acute emergency for national education systems. The governments of the region, led by the Ministries of Education, have rapidly implemented distance learning modalities, supporting educational staff and mobilizing parents, caregivers and communities, with a view to ensuring the continuity of learning as an immediate response.

At the regional level, multiple instances of technical and political dialogue have been convened, which clearly demonstrated strong commitment and corresponding action by Governments with the support of international, regional and national organizations. The various dialogues held during the first month of pandemic then highlighted three common central themes that require immediate and longer-term political and programmatic support:

1. Important advances and innovation in the area of distance education have been made through the use of technologies in recent weeks more than at any other time. However, there are still important challenges to guarantee equity and inclusion, considering the most vulnerable and marginalized population groups;

2. There is need to move towards flexible educational systems, with a focus on preparedness; and

3. A new mentality and paradigm shift towards interdisciplinarity and intersectoriality is required beyond education sector-focused planning and implementation. Cooperation and collaboration across different sectors and actors is paramount.

In other words, this crisis presents itself an unprecedented opportunity to transform national education systems into one of resilience, making the SDG-Education 2030 Agenda more relevant and necessary than ever.

Regional Webinar Series

It is against this background that in collaboration with the Regional Education Group for Latin America and the Caribbean, UNESCO launched on 17 April, a biweekly series of knowledge and information exchange, and of policy dialogue, in order to respond to the pandemic, focusing on the four pillars of SDG-Education 2030: equity, inclusion, quality and lifelong learning.

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The objective of this initiative is to support the Ministries of Education and the different educational actors for the development, management and dissemination of relevant evidence and to inform the immediate response as well as the medium and long-term actions towards the 2030 goal. In addition, considering the need for interdisciplinary response, the dimension of culture, health and other areas will also be touched upon during the series.

Considering the specific contexts of each sub-region, Latin America and the Caribbean, two parallel schedules are implemented.

Each webinar will be recorded and made available with presentations and reference materials on UNESCO’s portal dedicated to COVID-19 (https://es.unesco.org/fieldoffice/santiago/covid-19-education-alc). At the same time, for each webinar, in-depth country experiences will be further explored and documented both in Spanish and English with a view to promoting sustainable knowledge exchange and policy dialogue with regional public goods across the region and to contributing to the same at the global level.

The Caribbean webinar series is organized in partnership with CARICOM Secretariat and the Regional Education Group Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Caribbean Webinar Series n°6. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in times of COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for the Caribbean Region

The COVID-19 pandemic is severely affecting TVET systems and labor markets, amidst a crisis that puts a strain on health systems and arrests economic development. The health crisis has put a stop to training programs provided by companies and institutions, forcing changes in the organization of training and work. Priorities focus today on ensuring continuity of skills development and introducing short-term training programs to bridge the skills gap that will result.

The resulting economic crisis is leading to a major recession across key economies and activity sectors, which could worsen into a durable depression. In a recent report on the economic effects of COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean, ECLAC predicted that the pandemic will lead to the most severe contraction in economic activity in the region’s history, with the Caribbean facing a 1.5 percent drop brought on by decreased demand for tourism services. The effects of the decline in tourism will be felt in particular by micro- and small enterprises, which represent a huge proportion of the hotel and restaurant sector.

Skills development will be part of the policy response to the massive loss of jobs, to reorient workers towards employment or entrepreneurship. Besides, the crisis might lead to emerging trends in the world economy being accelerated, such as the digitization of the workplace, or reversing, such as globalization and the concentration of strategic industries in a few countries. Major shifts in the demand for skills on the labor market may occur, that TVET systems will need to address.

The sixth episode of the Caribbean webinar series therefore addresses TVET and skills development in the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to provide a setting for discussion and collaboration among TVET authorities and practitioners within Caribbean countries, with a particular focus on the following key questions:

- What is the current situation in the provision of TVET programs at different types and levels of education?
- What measures are being taken by national governments to ensure continuity of skills development

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programs or to prepare for the return to face to face classes in the Caribbean region?

- What resources/materials are available in each country to support continuity of skills development programs in the Caribbean?
- What are/have been the main challenges to guarantee continuity of TVET training programs during the pandemic?
- What are the possibilities/opportunities for international and regional cooperation from multilateral agencies or the exchange of experiences and TVET resources among countries in the region?

The answers to these questions will make an important contribution to better assess the challenges currently facing skills development and develop strategic policies to address the socioeconomic effects of COVID-19 in the Caribbean region, through collaborative efforts and synergies among major national, regional and global TVET stakeholders.

Objectives:

- To share emerging challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and the response of TVET systems in the Caribbean region.
- To promote Caribbean cooperation and exchange of ideas, experiences and resources on TVET to address the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for the new opportunities.

Agenda:

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<td>11:00 – 11:05</td>
<td>Welcome and introduction: Dr Faryal Khan, Programme Specialist for Education, UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean</td>
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<td>11:05 – 11:13</td>
<td>Keynote: Perspectives on the Impact of COVID-19 on TVET systems in the region Dr Ramón Iriarte, Education Program Specialist, OREALC/UNESCO Santiago</td>
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<td>11:13 – 11:45</td>
<td>Presentations (8 minutes each) Dr Marcia Rowe Amonde, Senior Director - TVET Development and Support Systems, HEART Trust NTA Ms. Pauline Whiteman, Chief Executive Officer, Caribbean Association of National Training Authorities (CANTA) Dr Ruby S. Alleyne, Vice-President, Quality Assurance &amp; Institutional Effectiveness, University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) Dr Michael Axmann, Senior Specialist for Enterprise, Productivity and Vocational Training, ILO/CINTERFOR in Montevideo, Uruguay</td>
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<td>11:45 – 11:48</td>
<td>Caribbean Youth Representative Mr Kendelle Crepin, trainee, National Energy Skills Centre, Trinidad and Tobago</td>
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<td>11:48 – 12:25</td>
<td>Q&amp;A and Discussion</td>
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<td>12:25 – 12:30</td>
<td>Summary, Key Messages and Closing</td>
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<td>• Dr Faryal Khan, Programme Specialist for Education, UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean</td>
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