



# HIGHER EDUCATION & TECHNICAL VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (TVET)

# Constant and Committed Leadership: Caribbean HEIs' Response to COVID-19



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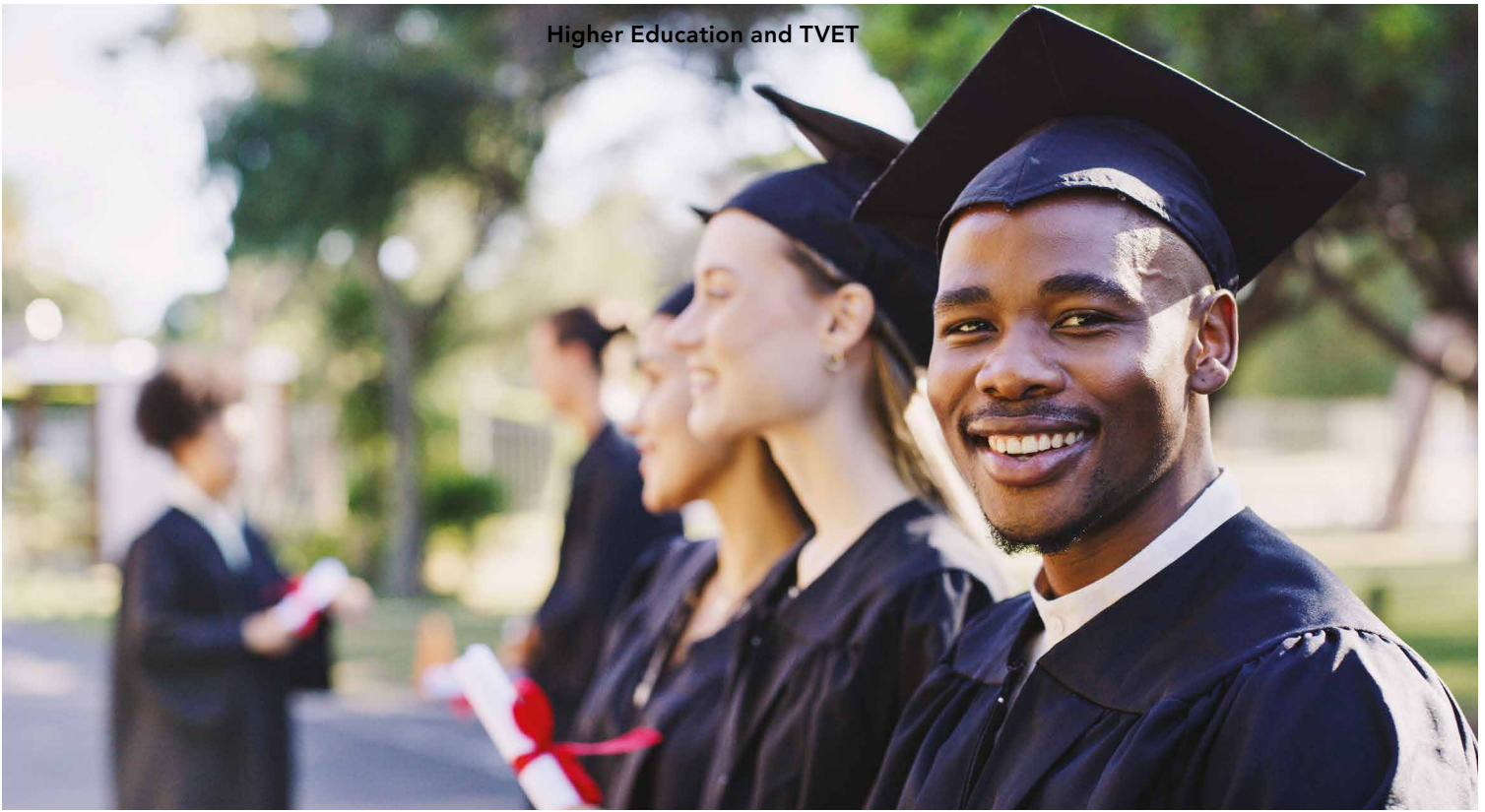
Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the English-speaking Caribbean were already facing funding challenges, in particular those that depend wholly or in part on governments, directly or indirectly. Directly infers that payments are made to the institutions through government subventions, while indirectly reflects payments made through student loan facilities such as the Student Loan Bureau in Jamaica or the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) programme in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition to funding challenges, indigenous Caribbean HEIs have been grappling with the internationalisation of higher education and the concomitant competition from offshore entities, as well as the increasing availability of online programmes made possible by the significant advances in information technologies. Issues such as attracting high-quality academic staff and ensuring ongoing relevance and quality

of programmes and courses in a highly globalised operating environment remain a constant consideration of the leadership of all HEIs.

On 11 March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic, the HEIs globally joined other organisations in pivoting to online work. Emergency remote teaching (ERT) was used to describe the mode of instruction delivery utilised, to distinguish it from the regular high-quality online education.

## What was the impact?

The impact of the pandemic on Caribbean HEIs was, we believe, both positive and negative. The negatives were primarily financial – stemming from decreased enrolment due to job loss and inability to pay tuition, with students opting to pursue pathways alternative to face-to-face education. In the case of publicly funded institutions, there was uncertainty regarding government subventions, as scarce national financial resources were redirected to respond to the



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immediate public health issues. Reduced income made it impossible to maintain or upgrade infrastructure, including technology infrastructure critical for the delivery of instruction in ERT mode or for transitioning to full online delivery.

The psychological impact of the pandemic on students and staff has not been fully assessed. Students reported a loss of camaraderie associated with not being able to connect with fellow students and faculty in spaces that are conducive to learning. Academic and administrative staff reported challenges with work-life balance. This was a global phenomenon, with many academics and administrators taking the brunt of managing both work and home – including managing their children’s online learning – simultaneously.

Financial difficulties which resulted from the pandemic, and in turn threatened the financial sustainability

of HEIs, included a decline in tuition income, the introduction of unplanned capital expenditure and new types of operational costs, increased sanitation costs, suspension of entrepreneurial activities, surrender of part or the whole of the institution’s investment portfolio, and reduction of productivity. The University of Technology in Jamaica, for instance, was reported to have been forced to liquidate its investment portfolio to cope with the financial difficulties which resulted.

### **How did institutions respond?**

The response by Caribbean HEIs was mixed. Some institutions were able to transition to remote online teaching more effectively than others. Immediately following the declaration of work-from-home mandated by governments, The University of the West Indies (UWI) allowed resident

students to return to their homes, where possible. Administrative staff pivoted to online work and, where necessary, essential staff continued to report to work with all COVID-19 protocols in place. In the meantime, the expertise in online delivery within the Open Campus was deployed to train academics at the other four campuses in the use of online teaching tools. After two weeks, all UWI campuses were able to resume classes in hybrid mode – a combination of emergency remote teaching and face-to-face in the case of clinical training and laboratories – and continued to do so until the start of the academic year in August 2022. Courses that required a practical module were deferred to later semesters and resumed when restrictions were lifted, with protocols in place for the management of laboratories and clinical training. Counselling services for staff and students were provided by the human

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resources departments, in collaboration with on-campus health centres and student departments.

Already attempting to bridge the gap between online delivery and face-to-face instruction, the University of Guyana responded with alacrity to the potential learning loss that naturally accompanied the global shutdown of all institutions. Given the absence of face-to-face meetings, the assessment strategy was revised to include a series of practical and valid means of assigning continuous assessments to students. Another mitigating factor was the relaxing of regulations for the payment of fees. Students were not penalised if they were unable to complete the payment of fees because of the disruption to their earning capacity. The University also invested in upgraded Zoom access and Moodle platforms to facilitate the delivery of classes for students. Faculty and students were exposed to training programmes to upgrade their skills in the use of eLearning technology. Further, systems were established to ensure that students and faculty had access to free counselling services that were required based on the traumatising effects of COVID-19.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, the College of Science, Technology, and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT) had deliberately adopted a phased approach to transitioning courses and programmes to the online learning environment. By March 2020, therefore, 35 per cent of courses were already available via the College’s Moodle platform, making the transition to the online environment more manageable. Using the Train the Trainer model, the College’s technology working group collaborated with suitably-trained faculty to convert courses and equip

faculty with alternative strategies for the online delivery of instructions. Students also benefitted from training programmes and tutorials to help them navigate the online teaching and learning environment. While the training provided relief for some students, many remained concerned about their ability to access reliable internet connection, navigate the virtual classroom, connect with faculty, and complete assessments successfully. Further, the economic challenges brought on by the pandemic hindered many from meeting their financial obligations to the College, and some withdrew from their courses. In response, COSTAATT introduced a number of relief measures, including the removal of penalties and holds for course withdrawals and delayed payment, waiver of late fees, automatic extensions of library loans, introduction of fully online counselling support services, and extended deadlines for submission of assignments. Further, the College introduced a computer loan programme, through which computers, donated by a corporate partner, were loaned to students for an academic year.

### How did institutions address the challenge of assessment?

During the pandemic, assessments were a major challenge for all institutions. Where possible, assessments were summative and 100 per cent coursework. COSTAATT developed alternative assessments for courses that required field research and engagement with the public. However, courses requiring in-person lab sessions, clinical training, or face-to-face final examinations were deferred until the lifting of the pandemic restrictions. To support students who experienced connectivity or technology issues during

exams, a final exam backup session was introduced. Similarly, at The UWI, where possible, assessments pivoted to 100 per cent coursework and, in some instances, proctoring software was utilised. However, as soon as it was possible, face-to-face examinations resumed. Despite these challenges, as an indicator of success, students pursuing programmes at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were largely able to complete their programmes of study, as evidenced by graduation ceremonies held virtually and in hybrid mode in 2021, at both institutions.

### What are the recommendations for handling future crises?

In reflecting on the Caribbean experience, it is determined that there were similarities with the global experience. We, therefore, recommended the following for handling future crises in higher education administration:

- Application of scenario planning to steer HEIs through crises.
- Development, by governments, of specific national policies to aid Caribbean HEIs to deal with the challenges.
- The support of vulnerable students, which was the knee-jerk reaction to the pandemic, should be assessed and codified where deemed appropriate.

The COVID-19 pandemic tested Caribbean HEIs but we believe these institutions have emerged not unscathed, but with newfound knowledge of what they can do, cannot do, and what can be improved. It is important that HEIs continue to nurture resilience at the institutional and constituent levels, in order to thrive. ■

# UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA

to restore the dignity of man



The University of Nigeria, Nsukka is a Federal University located in Enugu State. It was founded in 1955 and formally opened on 7 October 1960. The University operates on three campuses namely Nsukka, Enugu and Ituku Ozalla. The Institution prides itself as the first land-grant university in Nigerian and the entire African Continent. It continues to rank among the first five elite universities in Nigeria. Classes began at the Nsukka campus on 17 October 1960, with an enrolment of 220 students and 13 academic staff. Currently, the University has over 50, 000 students.

With its motto 'To Restore the Dignity of Man', the University today has grown to 19 faculties and over 100 departments. The main campus of the university is located on nearly 900 hectares of hilly savannah in Nsukka, some 80km north of Enugu, the state capital. The Nsukka campus enjoys a pleasant and healthy climate. An additional 200 hectares of arable land there are available for agriculture, while another 200 hectares is set aside for staff accommodation.

The University of Nigeria is renowned for having produced first-class academics and administrators. Notable amongst them are the author Chinua Achebe, who held a research and teaching appointment at the University in the early 1970s and the astrophysicist Sam Okoye, who founded the Space Research Centre in 1972. The centre remains one of the few institutions in Africa that researches and offers courses in astronomy, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The medical school performs most of its activities in the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH), where doctors and

other health workers are trained to exceptionally high standards and have proven over the years that they can effect a significant positive change in Africa, and for the entire healthcare system globally. Doctors and nurses trained in the institution have also contributed significantly to the advancement of medicine. The first open-heart surgery in Sub-Saharan Africa was performed at the UNTH in 1974. The team of surgeons were led by the visiting Professor Yacoub from the United Kingdom, assisted by the Nigerian Professors Adikwu and Anyanwu. And with the siting of the Nigerian National Cardiothoracic Centre at UNTH Enugu, the College of Medicine has since developed into the centre of excellence for cardiothoracic surgery and tropical cardiology for the entire West African region.

Today the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, has a particular focus on science and innovation. Through its iconic and visionary Vice-Chancellor, Professor Charles Arizechukwu Igwe FAS, the University is driving innovations in Nigeria through impact-based research and innovative technologies. The University of Nigeria hosts many centres of excellence, including the UNESCO Biotechnology Centre, the Resource and Environmental Policy Research Centre, Environment for Development (REPRC-EfD) Nigeria, and the African Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Power and Energy Development (ACE-SPED).

The University of Nigeria is committed to providing evidence-based advice to policymakers to help solve the myriads of problems confronting Nigeria and the entire African continent.

## MISSION

To place the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the forefront of research and the development innovation, knowledge transfer and human resources development in the global academic terrain, while promoting the core values which will ensure the

## VISION

To create a functional, globally competitive and research focused university which is not just an Ivory Tower but responsive to the needs of the society while delivering world class education and knowledge.



**PROF. CHARLES A. IGWE FAS**  
Vice-Chancellor  
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