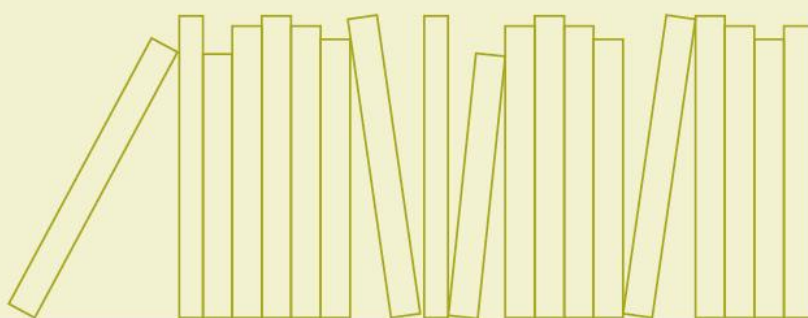


Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean

ECLAC SUBREGIONAL HEADQUARTERS FOR THE CARIBBEAN



Report of the expert group meeting on selected online learning experiences in the Caribbean during COVID-19



UNITED NATIONS





Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

Expert group meeting on selected
online learning experiences
in the Caribbean during COVID-19

Virtual meeting, 4 February 2021

LIMITED
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25 March 2021
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**REPORT OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING
ON SELECTED ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES
IN THE CARIBBEAN DURING COVID-19**

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A. ATTENDANCE AND ORGANIZATION OF WORK

1. Place and date of the meeting

1. The expert group meeting (EGM) on selected online learning experiences in the Caribbean during COVID-19 was convened virtually by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) subregional headquarters for the Caribbean on Thursday 4 February 2021, from 9 a.m. to 11.40 a.m. (Port of Spain time).

2. Attendance¹

2. The EGM was attended by officials from ministries of education and technology in four ECLAC member States - Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago; and in one ECLAC associate member - British Virgin Islands. Also in attendance at the EGM were representatives from the following organizations: Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC), Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE), eLearning Jamaica Company Limited, One on One Educational Services Limited, and the Trinidad and Tobago National Council of Parent-Teacher Associations (NPTA).

3. Agenda

1. Welcome, Introductions
2. Overview and presentation of the study
3. Discussion on presentation and study
4. Closing remarks

B. SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

1. Opening of the meeting

3. The Associate Programme Management Officer of the Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre (CKMC) in ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean welcomed participants to the EGM to discuss the background document entitled “Selected online learning experiences in the Caribbean during COVID-19.” She introduced the Director of ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, who in delivering her opening remarks, stated that the EGM would consider the role played by information and communication technologies (ICTs) in supporting the equitable development of online distance learning for students at various levels of education in the Caribbean.

4. She highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic led to the widening of education gaps in the subregion, with the most vulnerable groups being students from “from poor and rural households who have lost months of schooling for lack of access to either the Internet or to equipment needed for digital distance learning”. In this regard, she noted that the study provided a platform for discussion and that it outlined the diversity of the approaches by countries in adapting to online learning systems in the subregion “in response to partial and complete school closures”. She underlined that the background study was “intended to raise awareness of the issues that Caribbean countries must confront” in seeking to deliver and “to protect education opportunities for all students equitably in the face of unprecedented challenge of COVID-19”.

¹ See annex I for a full list of participants.

5. In closing, the Director expressed her appreciation for the presence of “representatives of the member countries that have participated in the study, but also representatives from regional and international organizations that support governments in providing quality education at all levels in the subregion”. She then encouraged the active contribution of the participants, including questions and comments, so as to “ensure that the findings of the study are as robust and complete as possible” and “so that the purpose of removing barriers to online learning and ensuring learning continuity, especially for poor and marginalized students in the face of this pandemic and for the future”.

2. Presentation: Selected online learning experiences in the Caribbean during COVID-19

6. The consultant thanked the representatives of the countries who participated in the interviews for the study. He expressed that the study, which is co-authored with the Associate Programme Management Officer, presents an excellent opportunity for the collaboration of countries across the subregion.

7. In his presentation, he shared that the context of the study was within the framework of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. He stated that online learning during COVID-19 may be viewed as an extension of this SDG. The study aimed to provide insight into the application of ICTs during COVID-19 to support equitable development of online, distance learning for students in primary, secondary, and tertiary education systems across the Caribbean. In addition to offering insights and best practices, he highlighted that the study provided recommendations of universal applicability to ensure education systems “build back better”. He noted that interview participants also included regional organizations, private companies, and youth groups.

8. He outlined the research methodology, which entailed a review of global and regional policy frameworks for ICTs in education; the consultation of centralized databases of the United Nations and the World Bank, as well as voluntary national reviews (VNRs); and the conduct of interviews with 24 representatives of the selected countries and territories, reflecting geographic and demographic diversity. The geographic diversity included multi-island States as well as those with large inland regions, while the demographic diversity included migrant, refugee and indigenous populations.

9. General findings revealed COVID-19 as an accelerant for the increase in the use of online learning technologies and capacity among educators, students and parents. There was also an increase in stakeholder engagement and training across education levels, which ensured open communication channels, as well as the expansion of pre-existing initiatives. Such initiatives include remote examinations as conducted by the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), and with national learning management systems (LMS) in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica, which ensured the continuity of access to education. Another key finding was the emergency deployment of technologies and upskilling for capacity building in Barbados, the British Virgin Islands and Guyana. He also noted that there was a multifaceted approach to the procurement of devices, which ranged from government sources to private donations and even bring your own device (BYOD) programmes.

10. Ongoing challenges identified include moving ICTs outside of the classroom to a remote learning centred approach; ensuring access to online learning amongst marginalized populations and students with disabilities; data collection efforts to ensure access and efficacy of online learning during emergency situations; lack of uniform inclusion of online learning, which has showed improvement; the adaptation of national ICT policies during COVID-19; and finally the urban-rural and socioeconomic divide, as it related to accessing Internet, devices, and technological infrastructure.

11. Further general findings show that primary school education initiatives were generally being delivered through traditional technologies, such as television and radio, while online learning technologies or LMS were generally used at the secondary and tertiary education levels. The study also identified the tertiary education sector as having an “early adopter advantage” during the onset of COVID-19, where it had already built the infrastructure to support remote learning over several decades; the multi-campus approach of the University of the West Indies (UWI), through which distance education is provided in the subregion, was one such example. Blended learning was also identified, where the use of online learning technology would be incorporated in post-pandemic education alongside traditional classroom learning. Examples of consolidated guidelines, which ensured a uniform approach by stakeholders, for the deployment of consistent online learning and hardware use were found in Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago.

12. The consultant then shared general recommendations for countries to improve their education systems, given the challenges within the context of COVID-19 and beyond. The recommendations included the promotion of flexible and inclusive learning systems across all levels of education, through the use of fundamental technologies; the development of a unified vision for curriculum and content with online learning; the development of a centralized LMS or content page, with a “one-stop shop” approach, also ensuring inclusivity and accessibility; training programs for all key stakeholders; assessments towards greater efficacy; inclusivity across all learning solutions; and cultivation of a mindset shift among key stakeholders, particularly educators.

13. Additional recommendations included the provision of support helplines to triage inquiries; the provision of health and well-being information via education processes; the development of public private partnerships with local ICT vendors; and that COVID-19 provided educators with an excellent opportunity to promote self-reliance and self-learning as lifelong skills.

3. Discussion on presentation and study

14. The discussion centred on the various approaches to online learning that are being used by the selected ECLAC member States and Associate members in the Caribbean during the COVID-19 pandemic, best practices in online learning systems, inclusive policies, public private partnerships, access to devices by vulnerable student groups, and Internet connectivity issues. Data collection, digitization, the standardization of technology and learning systems, as well as teacher training were also identified as common challenges to the implementation of effective and inclusive learning systems.

15. The representative from One on One Educational Services expressed his appreciation for the research conducted within the draft study and shared that his organization had collaborated with the Ministry of Education in Jamaica to promptly launch an online learning system for students at all levels during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. He credited the prioritization of investing in online learning education systems, devices and teacher training, over the last seven years for this state of readiness. He highlighted that teachers were able to provide synchronous learning and had prepared more than 15,000 hours of pre-recorded lessons for the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) and the Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE). In recognizing the vulnerability of the subregion due to natural disasters, he emphasized the need for the investment in educational infrastructure to develop online learning. He also shared offline learning solutions that were being developed by his organization, since there were Internet connectivity issues in various countries, and he noted that radio and television media did not provide the two-way communication that was needed for effective learning. He called for the enabling of public private partnerships for the application of technologies to modernize the education system in the subregion.

16. The School Liaison Officer, Information Technology and Quality Assurance, in the Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training of Barbados enquired about the best practices that were identified during the conduct of the study. The consultant responded that one such best practice was that of the guidelines approach which ensured the uniformity within the application of learning science. He provided examples from Barbados and Guyana where documentation was developed to support the use and repair of hardware devices, teacher-student communication, and other relevant information resources that are vital for such online learning platforms. Other best practices noted were the training of all key stakeholders, inclusion of learning science in online learning practices, and blended learning.

17. The representative of eLearning Jamaica shared an overview of how his organization provided technological support to the education system during the pandemic, via an investment in over 40,000 tablets for students from vulnerable groups, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information in Jamaica. He also discussed the idea of having content servers from which students can download content without Internet access, to bridge the digital divide. He further shared that the organization was involved in other investment initiatives which assist students to purchase devices, as well as those that provide teachers with devices.

18. Another representative from One on One Educational Services in Jamaica stated that the organization had completed a standardized timetable for primary and secondary schools students to continue their participation in online classes in Jamaica and the Bahamas. She noted that the organization overcame the previous challenges of data collection and teacher training for the online learning environment.

19. During discussion on the topic of inclusive online learning systems, the consultant underscored the importance of sustainability, long-term investments, as well as capacity building and orientation for new educators in the use of technological systems. He underlined the importance of research on access to education, flexibility, and inclusivity regarding diverse populations, including students with disabilities, and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. He noted the example of Barbados, where schools remained open for students with disabilities to ensure these students could learn during the pandemic. He further explained that current health protocols were observed, where classes were delivered to very small groups and that transport was provided for the students.

20. A representative from One on One Educational Services in Jamaica expressed his agreement with the need for the development of inclusive educational systems to provide support for vulnerable student populations who may have limited Internet connectivity, including students with disabilities and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. He also shared that his organization has designed its programs to include search capabilities for their video classes.

21. A representative from the Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training, Barbados, shared that his country had implemented blended learning environments during the majority of the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted, however, that schools have since had to physically close, and fully implement online learning, due to new lockdown measures, as there was a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases. In this regard, several challenges have arisen, including a shortage of devices, Internet connectivity and even a lack of electricity.

22. The representative of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Youth Affairs, Fisheries and Agriculture of the British Virgin Islands also shared about the implementation of a blended learning system in this territory, where the children attend class simultaneously, but with some at home and some at school to facilitate social distancing. While there was an improvement regarding access to devices, she noted, however, that connectivity issues were still a challenge.

23. In closing the discussion, the representative from the Trinidad and Tobago NPTA stated that during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers used YouTube as the platform for the delivery of their online classes, to facilitate flexible access to the content by the students. Other information-sharing tools used included WhatsApp, Google Classroom and an education platform from the Ministry of Education. He also noted that there was an increase in the access to technological devices, due to government assessments and support received from the private sector.

4. Closing remarks

24. In delivering the closing remarks, the Officer-in-Charge of the CKMC expressed his gratitude to all participants and to all the interviewees for their active participation in the EGM and study. He also thanked them for the updates and feedback that were provided during the discussion and underscored the importance of education to sustainable development in the Caribbean. He invited the participants to send any additional feedback via email, after the EGM, since this would ensure the accurate reflection of the learning environment in the various jurisdictions, and signalled ECLAC's interest in countries sharing their experiences in addressing cyberbullying and students with disabilities.

Annex I**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

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Annex II**PROGRAMME**

09:30 – 09:45

Welcome, Introductions

- Amelia Bleeker, Chairperson, Associate Programme Management Officer, Caribbean Knowledge Management Centre (CKMC), ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean
- Diane Quarless, Director, ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean

09:45 – 10:15

Overview and presentation of the study

- Ryan J. Crowder, ECLAC consultant

10:15 – 12:20

Discussion on presentation and study

- Representatives of government ministries and departments responsible for education and technology from participating Caribbean countries, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago
- Representatives of Caribbean and other regional organizations with education and technology mandates

12:20 – 12:30

Closing remarks

- Johann Brathwaite, Officer-in-Charge, CKMC



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