

## ABOUT ECLAC and the CDCC

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It was established in 1948 to support Latin American governments in the economic and social development of that region. Subsequently, in 1966, the Commission (ECLA, at that time) established the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean in Port of Spain to serve all countries of the insular Caribbean, as well as Belize, Guyana and Suriname, making it the largest United Nations body in the subregion.

At its sixteenth session in 1975, the Commission agreed to create the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) as a permanent subsidiary body, which would function within the ECLA structure to promote development cooperation among Caribbean countries. Secretariat services to the CDCC would be provided by the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. Nine years later, the Commission's widened role was officially acknowledged when the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) modified its title to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

### Key Areas of Activity

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean (ECLAC/CDCC secretariat) functions as a subregional think-tank and facilitates increased contact and cooperation among its membership. Complementing the ECLAC/CDCC work programme framework, are the broader directives issued by the United Nations General Assembly when in session, which constitute the Organisation's mandate. At present, the overarching articulation of this mandate is the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Towards meeting these objectives, the Secretariat conducts research; provides technical advice to governments upon request; organizes intergovernmental and expert group meetings; helps to formulate and articulate a regional perspective within global forums; and introduces global concerns at the regional and subregional levels.

Areas of specialization include trade, statistics, social development, science and technology, and sustainable development, while actual operational activities extend to economic and development planning, demography, economic surveys, assessment of the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters, climate change, data collection and analysis, training, and assistance with the management of national economies.

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean also functions as the Secretariat for coordinating the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The scope of ECLAC/CDCC activities is documented in the wide range of publications produced by the subregional headquarters in Port of Spain.

### MEMBER COUNTRIES

Antigua and Barbuda	Haiti
The Bahamas	Jamaica
Barbados	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Belize	Saint Lucia
Cuba	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Dominica	Suriname
Dominican Republic	Trinidad and Tobago
Grenada	
Guyana	

### ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

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Turks and Caicos Islands
United States Virgin Islands

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## POLICY IMPERATIVES FOR EDUCATION REFORMS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Daniel Leon



**T**he Caribbean records a higher level of educational participation than the global average. The average years of schooling in the Caribbean was 12.3 years in 2020 compared to the global average of 11.3 years in the same year (World Bank, 2022).

If the quality of education offered in Caribbean schools and training institutions were at least on par with the global average, then products of Caribbean educational system must have better skills than an average worker. However, a survey of over 1800 Caribbean business managers in 2016 found that about one-third cited insufficient technical skills and competencies of the local labour force as a substantial or severe obstacle to business productivity (Dohnert, Crespi, and Maffioli, 2017).

The skills mismatch between Caribbean students and those demanded by local industries is particularly substantial regarding science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills, such as information and communications technology (ICT). Local industries require a workforce with these skills to stay competitive in the modern global economy. In the early 2000s, CARICOM (2005) identified that educational institutions were not equipping workforces to the changing nature of employability and the decline of low-skilled jobs in favour of higher-skilled ones, calling for education reform to meet the demands of the modern economy. Since then, international cooperation and subnational stakeholder engagement have characterized education reform strategies in the subregion that were aimed at adapting the workforce to the rapidly changing business realities (Jules and Williams, 2015).

Education reform in the Caribbean

must be predicated on critical policy imperatives. Caribbean educational institutions must undertake curricula review to ensure that students gain relevant and useful knowledge that equip them with functional skills that are in demanded in the labour market. Reducing skills mismatches in the subregion also requires mainstreaming TVET and internships in educational programmes, thus providing students and learners with the opportunity to integrate classroom learning with on-the-job learning whilst still in school. Given the global advancement in digital technology, mainstreaming digital competencies in school learning outcomes becomes a must in any education reform effort.

The skills mismatch between the competencies that graduates and school leavers possess and those that industries demand can be linked to outdated curricula and pedagogies that favour memorization and reproduction as opposed to impacting knowledge and its application. Caribbean policymakers have also highlighted the lack of technical and vocational training in educational curricula as a cause for the skills mismatch (Dohnert, Crespi, and Maffioli, 2017). It is noteworthy that the CARICOM (2017) Human Resource Development 2030 Strategy aims to create a seamless and holistic human capital development model from early childhood education to tertiary education to modernize school curricula. Central to this strategy is introducing competency-based education and training (CBET) where educational organizations gear learning

and examinations to standardized educational outcomes. This approach uses the CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF) to standardize these educational outcomes. Moreover, the CBET approach promotes academic education and technical and vocational skills training, thus systematizing a lifelong learning synergy from the school to the workplace (ECLAC, 2018). However, stakeholder engagement is critical to define and periodically update the competencies taught by educational institutions, particularly at the secondary and tertiary level, so that the skills of the graduates match industry demands.

Furthermore, experimenting with alternative and disruptive forms of learning can complement curricula modernization and advance CBET strategies, such as open schooling and distance learning models (ECLAC, 2018). Open schooling integrates students' creativity and innovation by exploring different subjects and learning approaches. Crucially, these approaches can be economically efficient, as they require less intensive involvement of teaching staff and can be operated with minimal physical infrastructure.

A way to address the skills mismatch between secondary school leavers and graduates of tertiary level institutions in the Caribbean is for educational institutions to instil the skills in demand by the labour market through technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and internship programmes. Countries in the Caribbean are mainstreaming these programmes in

their education reform strategies. For example, Jamaica aims to integrate TVET programmes at the secondary and tertiary levels to equip students with in-demand skills, allowing the future workforce to contribute to the development of the country directly (OPM, 2021). Central to this strategy is the aggressive marketing of TVET programmes promoting them as viable career paths for students. The revitalization of TVET at all education levels is also central to the education reform policy of Trinidad and Tobago (GoRTT, 2023). This policy, which covers the period 2023-2027, aims to make TVET the main education choice for students and learners through effective quality assurance frameworks, promoting a workforce with the skills needed for the modern economy. Similarly, the white paper on education reform in Saint Kitts and Nevis (GoSKN, 2009) established TVET as central for post-secondary education.

However, a major gap in the Caribbean strategies for integrating TVET into education reform is the lack of gender-sensitivity. Although the Jamaican strategy on education transformation acknowledges the gender disparity in tertiary education enrolment as 69% of Jamaican students in 2021 were women (OPM, 2021), the education reform strategies of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Saint Kitts and Nevis highlighted in this article did not elaborate a plan to incentivize girls and women to consider enrolling in TVET programmes and in careers that are in high demand but traditionally thought of as male-centric. The lack of gender-responsiveness in education reform strategies risks reproducing traditional career stereotypes of boys and men choosing more technical career paths, which happen to be in greater demand and commanding higher remuneration, potentially putting girls and women at greater disadvantage in the labour market in terms of access to decent work and liveable wages.

Public-private partnerships are central to the success of TVET programmes and in nurturing functional skills in students

of traditional educational institutions, especially through the promotion of internships that provide students and learners with practical work experience. The education reform strategies of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Saint Kitts and Nevis envision internship programmes so students can gain valuable work experience in local industries that complement their vocational and technical training. Public-private partnerships are critical for creating sufficient internship opportunities and enriching learning experience for students. These partnerships also serve as a means of continuously updating educational institutions on the skills demanded by employers through the feedback received from students returning from internships, thus reducing skill mismatches between the workforce and industries in the subregion.

Equipping students and learners with the skills in demand because of the global digital transformation is an imperative for education reform in the Caribbean. ICT skills and digital literacy are central competencies for the CBET approach, aiming to increase the match of student skills and industry demands. Jamaica has developed plans to mainstream digital transformation in education, highlighting the digital playground and digital literacy as central pedagogical tools at all levels (OPM, 2021). Of particular importance is the need to incorporate contract teachers for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) at the secondary and tertiary levels to tackle shortages of qualified teachers, particularly for these technical subjects that prepare students to find employment in the modern economic landscape. Trinidad and Tobago is mainstreaming the digital transformation in its education reform strategy by increasing digital inclusion and literacy in society and promoting online education and lifelong learning of digital technologies. Digitalizing the provision of educational services and human resource procedures in educational institutions and reforming school curricula to mainstream digital education are also key pillars of its

education policy.

Overall, while the Caribbean boasts relatively high schooling rates, high unemployment reveals a stark skills mismatch between graduates and industry demands. Addressing this skills mismatch requires comprehensive education reform focused on modernizing curricula, integrating technical and vocational education, and mainstreaming competencies needed for the modern digital economy. Successful strategies include adopting competency-based education and training, fostering public-private partnerships, and ensuring gender parity in educational programs. By aligning educational outcomes with the demands of local industries and the global digital economy, Caribbean nations can enhance workforce readiness and drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth. ■

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