

# THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING CARIBBEAN: REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXT

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## Background

In preparation for the new century governments of the Caribbean region have been forced to review the nature of their tertiary systems from the perspective of their contributions to responding to the challenges they face. This is indubitably linked to the underlying assumption that higher education is an indispensable component in the society that governments wish to create in the twenty first century. Governments and UNESCO are at one in recognising that the university has a particular relevance in the new world order of the twenty first century.

This Paper will attempt to provide information on Trends in Higher Education in the English-speaking Caribbean over the past twenty five years with special reference to the role and significance of the University of the West Indies (UWI), the regional university serving fifteen (15) member countries. In 1989 the heads of the contributing governments to the UWI declared at the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government of Conference in Grenada, the centrality of the university to the region's overall development and designated it the regional university 'indefinitely'.

Professor Kenneth Hall, former Principal of the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies (UWI) in his Paper entitled, *Developing a National Tertiary Education System*, states that,

*“the time has come to radically alter the philosophical foundations of tertiary education. All the indicators suggest that the limited number of programmes and students in tertiary education would be inadequate for Jamaica's future development. Broad access would seem to require mass tertiary education providing for wide access at different points, for articulation of programmes between institutions with specified missions located geographically and utilizing the benefits of modern technology to provide tertiary education for the nation”.*

These sentiments can be applied to the English-speaking Caribbean as a whole.

The Chancellor of the UWI, the regional university serving fifteen (15) English-speaking Caribbean territories, in his keynote address at the 2004 Conference on *Revisiting Tertiary and Higher Education Policy in Jamaica: Towards Personal Gain of Public Good* said that from its very inception, the UWI was conceived as being essential for the development of the Caribbean.

Professor Nigel Harris Vice Chancellor of the UWI, made the observation that in a world where 'education and knowledge capital' are increasingly demonstrated as sources of competitive advantage, first rate sources of tertiary education in diverse disciplines have become very necessary components of national and regional competitiveness and sustained development. He further pointed out that while the main

role of Universities and Colleges in the Caribbean region is seen as providing education to students seeking undergraduate degrees, it is equally important that there exists capacity for postgraduate and continuing education. It is not sufficient that our Universities only educate but that they play a central role in research that can drive creation of new products and services as well as ways of addressing the region's most challenging problems.

At the end of his first year in office, the new Vice Chancellor of the UWI, noted that the university and the region in which it is anchored were undergoing a period of immense regional and global change. From a small, single-campus, mainly residential institution operating in an elitist higher education setting, the UWI has evolved into a relatively large public-funded institution with three campuses, a combined enrolment of approximately 40,000 students and an annual output of some 6,600 graduates with first degrees, higher degrees and advanced diplomas.

Higher education in the region has expanded, both in terms of numbers participating in its programmes and the types of programmes being offered. The UWI's *Strategic Plan 2007-2012*, which was the result of intensive consultation with internal and external constituents, (Prime Ministers, Ministers of Education and other government officials of the 15 countries served by the university, leaders of regional and international organisations, the European Union, alumni associations both regional and extra regional, the Caribbean diaspora in North America, student leaders (undergraduate and graduate), academic and non-academic staff on the three main campuses and the 12 without campuses), states that this transformation which was essentially a response to the complex social, political and economic forces of change made it possible for the University to remain relevant and to sustain an unrivalled contribution to social mobility, national and regional development. In the Caribbean region the critical importance of higher education in the development process has long been recognised. A former Vice Chancellor of the UWI once said of universities:

*“No government or combination of governments, no commercial or trading organizations, no common markets or free trade areas can fulfill what are university functions—the search for knowledge by means of objective and free enquiry and the sharing of that knowledge.”*

Gift, in her article *Global Developments in Higher Education*, notes that

*‘for a regional institution such as the UWI, it is significant that the World Declaration on Higher Education respects the importance of regional contexts to allow for diversity and uniqueness of characteristics of higher education offerings. The international dimension of higher education is highlighted in terms of international research projects, exchange of knowledge, networking and the mobility of teachers and students, alongside the need to pay due attention to cultural values and circumstances at the national level.’*

Globally, higher education has had to face up to transforming factors such as, increasing competition among providers, the pace of technological innovation, the impact

of globalisation, funding constraints, the demand for relevance and social pressures to expand access. It is expected that many of these technological, economic and social forces will continue to exert great influence on the reshaping of higher education internationally. The following factors will be of particular importance to the regional university over the next decade:

- The dynamics of the knowledge-based economy and society
- The multiple impact of globalization with particular reference to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)
- The public policy commitment of contributing countries to the expansion of participation in tertiary education
- The continuing revolution in information, computer and telecommunication technologies.

Regionally, the challenges in the external environment include, the capacity to produce leaders in all spheres of activity from an increasingly diverse student population in terms of abilities, prior preparation, aptitudes and interest, recruitment and retention of high quality students and faculty in the face of global competition for talent at every level, growth of publicly funded national tertiary level institutions, including new universities, in direct competition with the UWI for teaching staff and funding, the need to build and expand the capacity for research and innovation in the absence of structured national and regional mechanisms for funding relevant research and maintenance and improvement of teaching and research standards of a more diverse student body in terms of prior academic preparation, interests and aptitude.

On the other hand, opportunities abound such as: the creation of new knowledge, the increasing demand for more highly-skilled workers, recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and continuing professional education towards fuelling the demand for higher education, development of the research and innovative capacity to increase the university's impact on the region, optimum use of enabling technologies and opportunities for strategic partnerships with other universities, knowledge networks and the corporate sector in niche areas of research and development which can enhance the institution's international reputation and access to resources.

The UWI's *Strategic Plan 2007-2012* numbers the following among its areas of internal strength:

- Its special status as a regional institution supported by 15 member countries with a presence in each of them
- Its reputation for high standards
- The unique concentration within the region of highly qualified staff skilled in a wide range of disciplines
- Its possession of an unrivalled pool of expertise on matters relating to the Caribbean
- Its recognised leadership position in the field of higher education in the region
- The outstanding achievements of its graduates in leadership positions in many fields regionally and internationally representing symbols of institutional excellence
- The significant body of intellectual output by its academic staff over the years

- The fact that it is a highly respected port of call for advice for CARICOM governments and its role as a source of research and expert services to many successful enterprises in the region
- The unsurpassed beautiful settings of its campuses

However, in order to enhance its relevance and effectiveness the institution must address existing weaknesses such as:

- The instability of funding and heavy dependence on governments for core support
- The erosion of the regional characteristics of the University as a result of the overwhelming dominance of the three existing campuses by students from the host country
- The need for more active engagement of external stakeholders
- The need for better dissemination of information on research findings, developments within the institution
- The rapid growth of enrolment in recent years without an accompanying increase in resources
- The need for further modernization of management systems
- The need for culture change to foster institutional behaviour and outcomes fully consistent with the institution's commitments and aspirations

The UWI recognises that in order to be able to deal with the challenges and take full advantage of the opportunities presented by the changing external environment, it will have to accelerate and deepen its own transformation by enhancing its responsiveness to legitimate stakeholder needs and expectations, infusing systems and processes with the flexibility required of a responsive and agile organization and by managing culture change to foster efficiency, effectiveness, excellence and accountability at every level.

### **Mission of the Regional University**

In the light of the UWI's enduring mission 'to propel the economic, social, political and cultural development of West Indian society through teaching, research, innovation, advisory and community services and intellectual leadership', the institution is required, *inter alia*, to:

- Provide the population of the region with access to high quality academic programmes which are effectively delivered and which help to build strong individual, national and regional capacities in response to changing human resource needs
- Provide complementary opportunities for higher education which foster intellectual development, creative activity and self-actualisation, enhance social and interpersonal relations and enable students to have a broader frame of reference for specialized knowledge
- Conduct rigorous basic and applied research which serves to (i) explore solutions to priority national and regional problems and challenges, (ii) create significant new

knowledge, (iii) exploit developmental potential and comparative advantages, (iv) elucidate important contemporary social issues, (v) situate itself and society in a changing world order and (vi) provide a sound basis for public policy formulation and decision-making

- Maintain a capacity to supply a wide range of expert technical, professional and advisory services to meet the needs of regional governments and the private sector
- Help the region to comprehend the nature and significance of contemporary issues and emerging global influences
- Strive to be a significant contributor to global intellectual growth and human development by active scholarship which harnesses the creative energies, cultural diversity, social experiences, biodiversity and other assets of the region
- Assist generally in strengthening education and training systems, at all levels, throughout the region and aid the development of the tertiary level education system in particular
- Assist the region to evaluate, assimilate, adapt and harness major new technologies in order to optimize potential benefits or limit negative impacts
- Develop strategic alliances with other institutions to expand access to tertiary education as well as the scope of teaching and research, and
- Foster an intellectually stimulating environment which can attract academic staff and students of high quality and in which ideas contend vigorously.

### **Vision for the Regional University**

According to the *Strategic Plan 2007-2012*, the University of the West Indies envisages that by the year 2012 it will have become an innovative, internationally competitive, contemporary university deeply rooted in the Caribbean, committed to creating the best possible future for all stakeholders. It will be the university of first choice for the region's students and talented academics and provide a truly supportive environment that rewards and it will be agile enough to thrive in a dynamic global environment. All this while preserving its core value system, which has been moulded by generations of staff and students over the last six decades.

In order to achieve this vision the university will, over the plan period, focus on building excellence in four areas which represent its core activities of teaching and learning, graduate studies, research and innovation and outreach. However, success in these areas will depend on achievement of certain major enabling factors such as transformation of the leadership, managerial and administrative culture and processes, effective marketing and branding, strengthening of regionality, leveraging international partnerships and funding of the institutions.

### **Funding**

The greatest challenge for the university is mobilization of the financial resources required to transform itself into a vibrant and competitive 21<sup>st</sup> century. The traditional sources of funding for universities are governments, tuition fees, research, business

ventures, asset investments and philanthropic giving. The policy-makers of the UWI, in compliance with contributing governments, have established that governments are expected to pay 80% of the economic cost of educating their students and the student will pay 20%. However, the governments of Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago have elected to pay 100 % of the economic costs. In Jamaica the Students' Loan Bureau has been established to assist needy students. This facility is not available in the smaller territories but even while student loan facilities are available, the cost of living expenses and the burdensome conditions of the loan make this facility unattractive.

Earlier in the paper reference was made to the multiple impact of globalization with particular reference to the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) as being of particular importance to the regional importance over the next decade which will of course include the plan period. In her article, *Diversity, Liberalisation and Competition in Tertiary Education: implications for Quality Assurance*, Professor Leo-Ryhnne examined the implications of the GATS for the regional university. A major concern is the World Trade Organisation (WTO) 'most favoured nation' principle whereby all trading partners must be treated equally in terms of market access. If one country is allowed to be a provider of higher education services in Jamaica, for example, all other WTO member countries must have similar access. The same applies to mutual exclusion: if one country is excluded from offering services of a particular type in a country, no other country can be permitted to offer those services.

Another principle, The National Treatment Policy, states that overseas providers of educational services must be treated equally with national providers. This has serious implications for the publicly funded tertiary and higher education institutions as this subsidizing of education can be interpreted as giving an unfair advantage to national and regional institutions. The fact that the governments of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago have committed to open to foreign competition the delivery of educational services at the tertiary level is cause for concern particularly as overseas providers have begun to penetrate the market resulting in a strong sense of competition in the tertiary and higher education sector.

The University of the West Indies recognises that if the university is to expand access to students, enhance the quality of its education and training programmes, increase the competitiveness of its research and knowledge development and improve outreach to the public, it cannot rely on government funding alone to generate the necessary resources. Over the past two decades this has become increasingly evident as non-governmental funding now accounts for 45% of the institution's revenue.

The plan to finance the transformation process focuses on a broadening of the funding base and the mobilisation of resources. Strategies by which this may be achieved include further growth in earned income facilitated by restructuring and strengthening of the Business Development Offices, formation of a University Consultancy Company, planned alumni giving and establishment of a UWI Endowment Fund, cost recovery through tuition fees together with suitably designed student financing support schemes, access to private sector funding sources and development finance from regional and international agencies.

### **Access, Relevance, Quality Assurance and Accreditation**

In the context of the new challenges posed by globalization, technological advances and the emerging trends in the social conditions of the region, heads of government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in 1997 challenged the education sector to increase enrolment at the tertiary level from a comparatively low average of approximately 7% to 15% by the year 2005 in recognition of the fact that a well educated human resource is essential for the ordering of economic, social and political expansion and development of the region. This call by the governments for increased access created the opportunity for the existing institutions to diversify and expand their programmes and courses, new methods of delivery and for new institutions to enter the sector. As a result there have been significant changes in the tertiary education sector across the English-speaking Caribbean. These changes involved not merely accommodating additional students in existing institutions but an increase in the number of universities from one regional institution to a number of national institutions offering degree and associate degree programmes. Some of these programmes are offered in affiliation with the UWI, with overseas universities or independently.

Assurance of a quality education is a significant hallmark of the regional university's history and continues to be an uncompromising goal. The UWI has pursued a rigorous three-pronged approach to quality assurance, regular quality assurance reviews of departments which have resulted in the development of a quality assurance system within each department, staging of workshops aimed at improving pedagogical skills, routine reviews of student evaluations of academic courses as well as surveys of employers on their opinion of UWI graduate students.

Over the past two decades the private sector and overseas colleges and universities have become involved in the provision of tertiary and higher education thus competing with the regional and national institutions for Caribbean students. One of the manifestations of globalization has been the proliferation of foreign universities, mostly registered as 'off-shore' institutions in a number of the islands of the region offering programmes in medical sciences targeted in the main at North American students, education and business.

This expansion provides access through a variety of pathways. Students now have several entry and exit points allowing larger numbers and a wider range of students to pursue study and gain experience relevant to their educational and career goals. Technological advances, distance education, open and e-learning have provided new opportunities for programme delivery.

However, as Leo-Rhynie writes, the diversity of provision and providers is not only structural but also ideological. In this type of scenario the tertiary sector could develop as one which is heterogeneous and segmented rather than coordinated, and competitive rather than cooperative. The establishment of the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI) as a regional umbrella organization and the Joint Committee for Tertiary Education (JCTE) in Jamaica represents efforts to achieve some measure of functional understanding despite the structural and ideological diversity.

With the increasing global competition for students imposing special requirements on national and regional institutions to be responsive to students' needs, such associations are of paramount importance. In some instances the development of partnerships and

linkages among intra-regional as well as extra-regional providers is essential allowing for student and staff exchanges, collaborative research and joint programmes. Thus, institutions with different missions and objectives can work together while respecting their different goals and varying traditions.

In the face of the increased diversity of providers of higher education, the modes of delivery, student recruitment and student profiles, types of programmes offered, among other considerations, issues of relevance and quality loom large particularly where local students are involved. With respect to relevance, tertiary education should be relevant not only to the needs of the individual but more particularly to the needs of the society for its advancement. There are concerns that off shore providers might not, with the 'for-profit' motive, be culturally sensitive to the context and needs of the region. In a region where higher education has traditionally played a significant developmental role through provision of the necessary human resource for leadership roles and functioning as the knowledge base to stimulate Caribbean economies, persistence of the concept of higher education as a 'public good' is of vital importance.

With the increasing diversity of providers, competition among providers and the likelihood of these continuing in the light of liberalization, the all important issue of quality comes into sharp focus. While the demand for increased access might be met the preservation of quality must be a central issue, as it is an assurance of quality which will protect and preserve public investment and the interests of all stakeholders. In Jamaica, for example, national quality assurance bodies such as the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) established in 1987 to register institutions and accredit programmes and institutions, have established certain basic quality requirements which are consistent for all tertiary institutions and programmes assessed.

With the establishment of national universities, the incursion of foreign providers and the expansion of other colleges Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados have also established national accreditation bodies. St Kitts set up a national accreditation body in the late 1990s principally to deal with the large number of applications for establishing off shore schools.

Regionally, efforts have been made to establish a CARICOM accreditation agency for tertiary education in the face of the variety and variability of existing mechanisms of evaluation and validation of tertiary education programmes. Specifically, the regional accreditation agency would be expected to:

- Establish in the Caribbean a seamless, efficient, internationally recognized system of post-secondary and tertiary education
- Promote and facilitate the movement of adequate numbers of persons with high level skills within the community
- Enhance and accelerate economic and social development in the community through the promotion and development of high level skills
- Secure and maintain international recognition and negotiate and conclude international agreements within third party state entities for mutual recognition.

In the area of professional accreditation, the UWI was the driving force behind the creation in 2004 of **the Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and Other Health Professions** consequent on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom's

General Medical Council (GMC) from accreditation of medical education programmes in universities of Commonwealth countries.

At the same time the Caribbean region has seen the establishment of many other 'offshore' for-profit medical schools of varying size and reputed quality. Many of these schools lack sufficient resources for clinical training where they are based. Added to this is the absence of regionally or internationally accepted accreditation procedures in some countries. As the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) itself has recognized, achieving reliable accreditation in countries with only one or a few medical schools and without independent experts, is particularly difficult. In response to these issues the establishment of a regional accreditation system, The Caribbean Accreditation Authority for Education in Medicine and Other Health Professions (CAAM) was done under the *aegis* of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in July 2004.

This initiative was also an integral component of the regional thrust to ensure quality education and training in the context of the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). The CSME entails the creation of a single large economic space without restrictions on cross-border movement of goods, services, capital, technology and skilled persons and without discriminatory access to the region's resources for CARICOM nationals.

The following are the CAAM's objectives:

- To achieve and maintain standards of excellence in programmes of education in medicine and other health professions.
- To establish an efficient system of regulation in relation to the standards and quality of such programmes of education.
- To secure international recognition of the programmes of education in medicine and other health professions.
- To maintain the confidence of the peoples of the region in the quality of medical and other health professions training offered in the region.

The CAAM, using an accreditation system based on the Liaison Committee for Medical Education (LCME) model, has since its inauguration in July 2004 carried out six (6) site visits, three to 'established' medical schools and three to proposed new 'off shore' medical schools.

The three established schools are:

- The University of the West Indies, a regional university with four training sites located in four of the CARICOM member states – The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad;
- The University of Guyana, a national university; and
- St. George's University an 'off-shore' university in Grenada with clinical training sites in St. Vincent, the USA and the UK.

The proposed new 'off-shore' medical schools are:

- The Saint James School of Medicine in Anguilla,
- British International University in Montserrat and,

- The University of Science, Arts and Technology in Montserrat.

In keeping with its remit the CAAM has developed standards for Veterinary and Dental Medical Education in consultation with the respective professional bodies both regionally and overseas. A database of reviewers for these health professions is being developed and it is anticipated that the accreditation process for these programmes will be initiated by the end of 2007.

The CAAM is charged with the responsibility of establishing affiliations, linkages and connections with other accrediting bodies to ensure international recognition. In the year 2006 the CAAM was granted full membership to the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and was represented at the 94<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Federation of State Medical Boards, held in Boston and the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Invitational Conference of the Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG) held in Philadelphia where some discussions took place with the ECFMG, the World Federation of Medical Education (WFME) and the CAAM for the joint hosting of a Conference on Accreditation of Medical Education Programmes in the Caribbean, held on May 13-15, 2007 in Jamaica.

This Conference brought together leading regional and international experts (80 participants from over 20 organisations/institutions/governments from the Caribbean, South America, North America and Europe) to reflect on the process of accreditation regionally and worldwide, and to examine efficient and effective options for maintaining and improving the accreditation system established thus far.

One of the aims of the Conference was to identify the needs of the CAAM and opportunities for its support. Arising out of its brief experience the CAAM was able to identify a number of areas of need and opportunities for support.

Over the past quarter of a century higher education has undergone rapid changes in its characteristics, its mode of delivery, contents, scope, mission and targets. The commercialization of higher education resulting in greater access and affordability to a greater number of persons puts the spotlight on quality and quality assurance. For developing countries such as those of the Anglophone Caribbean the challenges are the guarantee of quality, preservation of national culture and identity, establishment by governments of national policy objectives for higher education and the assurance of equity of access.

### **Integration, international cooperation, networks and associations in Higher Education**

When one considers higher education within the region in terms of discrete language groups, unrealistic and unhealthy levels of separation seem to surface. Various methods have been employed to address this possible divide, one of the more successful being the establishment of regional networks such as the Caribbean Universities' Network (CUN) and associations such as the Association of Caribbean Tertiary Institutions (ACTI), the Association of Caribbean Education Administrators (ACHEA) and the Association of Caribbean Universities and Research Institutes (UNICA).

The 1996 report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (UNESCO 1996) cites international cooperation, and by extrapolation, regional cooperation, as a growing function in support of sustainable development. The 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education adopted by the 1998 World Conference on Higher Education includes the establishment of efficient cooperation agreements as one of the challenges and difficulties confronting higher education institutions everywhere.

In this Paper I propose to give a history of UNICA and its activities as a vehicle impelling regional integration among higher education institutions and research institutes within the French, Spanish, Dutch and English-speaking Caribbean followed by a look at some of the challenges facing the Association and by extension, higher education institutions in the region.

## **History of UNICA**

In 1967 as the late Sir Philip Sherlock, second Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies (UWI), came to the end of his term of office he undertook an exploratory tour of the centers of higher learning in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and describing himself as 'a commercial traveler in education', found great sympathy for his aspirations in the then Chancellor of the University of Puerto Rico, Jaime Benitez. He was acutely aware that educational cooperation was a vehicle for nurturing and strengthening the feeling of regional awareness. Sir Philip found not only enthusiastic support for the idea of regional cooperation among universities in the region but also an intellectual climate which was prepared to cooperate in an enlarged arena comprising all of the Caribbean.

The birth of UNICA coincided with attempts by political leaders in the English-speaking Caribbean to rescue the concept of regional cooperation from the scrap heap of the failed Federation of the former British colonies. UNICA was unique in that in its definition of the Caribbean it included, irrespective of linguistic and cultural differences, all countries which were embraced or caressed by the Caribbean Sea. Thus, in addition to the English-speaking countries it encompassed higher education institutions in countries such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Curacao, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Guyana, Venezuela and Colombia. Today membership has been extended to institutions in Aruba, Suriname, Sint Maarten, the Caribbean Research Centre of the Medgar Evers College in New York and as far afield as the Caribbean Studies Centre of London Metropolitan University in London.

Prior to the establishment of UNICA, collaboration and cooperation between higher education institutions in the region took place in the context of a tight network of individuals. For example, through the University of Puerto Rico's Institute for Caribbean Studies, Puerto Rican academic leaders of the University had been introduced to the intellectual leaders of the French, English and Dutch speaking centers of higher learning in the rest of the region. Caribbean Scholars Conferences held in San Juan, Kingston and in Georgetown, Guyana, helped to create a regional awareness among scholars paving the way for acceptance of Sir Philip's idea of regional cooperation among universities in the region.

Additionally, foreign language teachers used their links with their counterparts in other regional institutions to promote student exchange programmes thus allowing their respective institutions to benefit from their contacts in other Caribbean and North American institutions.

It is worthy of mention that, in its definition of the Caribbean UNICA pre-dated by more than two decades the emergence of groupings such as CARIFORUM in 1994 (a grouping of the independent English and Dutch speaking states which form the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) with the Dominican Republic and Haiti) and which functions principally as a mechanism for the coordination of the European Union's development aid to the group under the Lome IV Convention) and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) formed in 1996 and of which UNICA is a 'social actor'. UNICA therefore stands as an early example of initiatives designed to unite the region and promote collaboration and partnerships.

UNICA's aim has been to foment cooperation and collaboration among higher education institutions to help promote the economic, social and cultural development of the region. Over the years a number of projects have been undertaken, such as the founding of the Association of Caribbean Universities, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL) a vibrant regional association which now functions independently of UNICA, and the Caribbean Student Exchange Programme to facilitate student exchange among member institutions.

The annual UNICA conference provides an opportunity to highlight a specific topic of interest to Caribbean academics. The 2003 Conference for example, with the support of UNESCO, focused on the role of the education sector in the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Out of this was developed a strategic framework to guide the response of education in the region to this devastating epidemic. For Governments and leaders of Caribbean society, it is a 'wake-up' call on the critical role of education, both formal and informal, as multi-sectoral responses to HIV/AIDS are being fashioned. UNESCO brought together African and Caribbean expertise and experience to create this new valuable tool in the struggle against the epidemic.

At present, there is unfortunately limited information available on universities' response to the epidemic and most of the existing studies focus on countries in sub-Saharan Africa or in the Caribbean. Little is known about universities' responses in the other parts of the world or how the lessons learnt in Africa or the Caribbean could be applied to institutions in similar circumstances in other regions. In 2004 UNESCO invited four UNICA member institutions, one from each of the language groups represented in the Association, to participate in a review aimed at identifying promising approaches undertaken by higher education institutions worldwide to prevent the further spread of HIV, to manage the impact of HIV/AIDS on individuals, campuses and communities. These approaches have since been analysed to identify lessons learnt and formulate recommendations for higher education institutions to respond sensitively, appropriately and effectively to the epidemic. These will form part of a global strategy to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The institutions reviewed were: the University of the West Indies (UWI), the Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre y Maestra (Dominican Republic), University of Suriname, and the Universite Quisqueya and Universite d'Etat d'Haiti, (Haiti). Reviewers were selected from other member institutions with the exception of the UWI.

UNICA welcomes this developing partnership with UNESCO as it will serve to enhance the Association's capacity to collaborate more closely with its member institutions and with networks of institutions beyond the region.

Links have also been established with networks such as the Inter-American Organisation for Higher Education (IOHE), the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), and further a field, the Consejo Universitario Iberoamericano (CUIB) and this latter network will facilitate links with the European University Association (EUA). These networks share the same goals: creation of strong ties of cooperation in the educational, cultural and human spheres; encouragement of inter-regional exchanges between educational actors; bolstering cooperation in education as a key objective with an emphasis on partnership between higher education institutions while respecting their autonomy, in particular through university exchanges and the development of distance education.

More recently, two of UNICA's member institutions, the UWI and the University of the Virgin Islands formed part of the Small Island States Universities Consortium (UCSIS) for Capacity Development to facilitate the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA). The President of the UVI was elected to head the Consortium which comprises universities, research institutes and partnering institutions and organizations which have agreed to cooperate in providing improved education, research and outreach to assist Small Island Developing States in implementing the BPOA. Through this link, UNICA, as an Association, is eligible to become an associate partner of the UCSIS.

Bilateral agreements between member institutions have met with varying degrees of success. In the case of the UWI, for example, the Strategic Plan (2002-2007) committed the institution in no uncertain way to collaborative ventures. A section of the Mission called for the UWI to:

***“Project itself more prominently on to the international higher education stage, facilitated by... expanding institutional collaboration with other universities and world class academics”.***

This is spelt out by way of a number of strategies including:

- Increasing collaboration with other universities
- Developing strategic partnerships
- Giving special attention to neighbouring French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch-speaking countries
- Recruiting more international students into programmes in graduate studies and research

The latest Strategic Plan, 2007-2012 addresses the need to elevate international partnerships to a mechanism to be used strategically and even more widely to support specific institutional objectives. As the UWI seeks to build capacity and international recognition in selected areas of research and innovation, efforts will be doubled in seeking out strategic partners within the global university network and among private enterprises which have complementary expertise and experience as well as cutting-edge

facilities in those areas. Arrangements such as these can facilitate knowledge transfer, innovation and access to research funding.

Through co-supervision and joint delivery of programmes international partnerships with other universities will be developed to expand academic offerings at the advanced degree level and accelerate research training in targeted areas.

The university recognises too that partnerships with other universities around the world will allow the institution to become better known, attract more international students to its programmes and help to build the university's international standing as a respected and competent partner. Such esteem is one consideration that influences the global ranking of universities.

These goals provide opportunities for IESALC/UNESCO to assist the regional university.

## **Challenges**

UNICA has now come to the point at which it is reflecting on new developments such as globalisation and internationalisation and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, (mentioned earlier), to name a few, which have significant implications for the Caribbean region and its member institutions. The challenge of globalisation to higher education institutions, particularly those in small states, is a real one. To quote the 2004 key-note speaker at UNICA's Annual Conference on the "**Regionalisation of Higher Education**",

*"We live in an age of globalisation, of increased human interaction, of instant communication with people thousands of miles away, of interdependence in the sense that our actions depend more and more on each other, near and far. We have seen on the one hand, the fragmentation of political entities and on the other hand, the unification of small entities. We have seen also the rise of new technologies of communication, the prominence of the Internet, the emergence of the free market and the importance of information as a factor of production- and all of this within a relatively short period of time. We have seen also, disillusionment evident in unemployment, poverty and continuing inequalities. In that kind of environment it should be clear that we must continuously search for and implement new paradigms and strategies in order to survive."*

According to Dennis Gayle (2004) the most successful universities in the current international tertiary education environment, are those able to respond to these emerging interactive challenges. A principal effect of these deeply transforming circumstances is that higher education, the arena of new knowledge development, is emerging as a global mega-industry. There has been a virtual explosion of 'universities worldwide forming partnerships with other institutions in the same country, with institutions in other countries and regions and with other kinds of institutions'. Institutions are recognising the importance of strategic partnerships to their survival.

In the Caribbean there is increasing competition from what are referred to as 'multinational' higher education institutions both on-shore and off-shore. These trends

are likely to gather momentum with the anticipated application of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) to the tertiary sector. The concern of course, is the extent to which these new providers of higher education are committed to national and regional development not to mention the issues of quality assurance, certification and international recognition. It is felt that the question of quality should be the deciding factor for students accessing education in a globalised marketplace. The implication is that the internationalization of higher education should not be a North-South engagement and movement of knowledge; rather, the credibility and historical relevance of our regional institutions place them in the position of themselves going global and taking their achievements beyond the region.

Quality assurance and certification is pivotal as a means of regulating these suppliers of educational services, whether foreign or local, with the bench-marking of standards and ensuring the protection of cultural mores and values. For the Caribbean region, the concern that the assurance of quality could be an onerous burden on existing regulatory mechanisms is well founded. The existing quality assurance mechanisms and certifying bodies are understaffed and under-funded; a complete overhaul and strengthening of these bodies is essential. Similarly, there is an urgent need to establish a regional accreditation body for tertiary education with links to and reciprocal recognition by the leading accreditation authorities in the metropole. One such regional body was recently established, an initiative by the UWI in conjunction with CARICOM, for accreditation of medical education programmes.

Earlier in the presentation I made reference to UNICA's Caribbean Student Exchange Programme aimed at facilitating student exchange among member institutions. The Association recognised that student exchange among member institutions has educational value in itself for students and the institutions which host them. It is a means of promoting understanding and cohesion in the Caribbean and an important vehicle for transmission among countries of the region of developmentally relevant knowledge and skills.

However, student exchanges do present major problems largely due to the economic circumstances of our students. As a result, as is the case with the UWI, institutions are more likely to receive in-bound students than to send out an out-bound cohort. Some financial assistance is provided by the institution from time to time but this is never enough.

Another issue is that of a regional education policy. Prominent educators in the English-speaking Caribbean have been calling for consultations among the relevant policymakers in the region to facilitate the formulation of a regional education policy. Quoting the Principal of the Mona Campus of the UWI, "***the region faces the dual challenge of formulating suitable national and regional policies and strategies designed to accelerate the pace of development, to strengthen governance structures, to promote social stability and to nurture its cultural creativity while at the same time, seeking to respond effectively to the challenges presented by the phenomena of globalisation and economic liberalisation***"

This goes for the entire Caribbean region, for every language group, without exception. Large and small Caribbean states are struggling within their reach to push forward development, to strengthen governance structures, to promote social stability and

to nurture cultural creativity. But, the new phenomena of globalisation and economic liberalization have such a huge impact on the development pace of our region, that it is putting a great deal of pressure on all of us, realising that we have no other choice than to address these challenges without delay seeking solutions for our mutual benefit.

Our higher education institutions are expected to play a leading role in assisting the society in the formulation of a vision and strategy for dealing with these challenges.

UNICA is aware of the need to exchange views on the nature of these challenges and identify strategic responses recognising the importance of cooperation and collaboration in arriving at answers. UNICA recognises that this collaboration and cooperation should take place among its member institutions but more important, the Association must avail itself of its links with other networks of higher education institutions in seeking to arrive at new paradigms to respond to these challenges.

The noble ideas which led to the founding of UNICA forty years ago are both more relevant and urgent than ever. The Association has been steadfast in facilitating academic contacts and in bringing together higher education institutions of the Caribbean region through projects and other activities. We could say that the work of our Association is a process of regionalising, of building the strength of individual higher education institutions through developing a capacity to work together as a region. In so doing, it is strengthening the capacity of higher education in the Caribbean region to meet the challenges of globalization and regionalisation, bearing very much in mind, the socio-economic reality of our region and the awareness of the fierce competition for limited and private resources.

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