Lifelong Learning in Jamaica: Coherent Pathways to Higher Education

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Abstract

Education in Jamaica and higher education in particular, continue to be influenced and shaped by global contemporary trends. This article situates lifelong learning in Jamaica within the context of the nation’s higher education system and explores some of the associated challenges and recent trends in the field. It examines lifelong learning as it is shaped by globalization, its role in the shift towards a knowledge-based society, and the continued diversification of higher
education opportunities with specific attention to financing and accessibility. The article takes a holistic look at lifelong learning as a necessary strategy for developing nations interested in developing human capital through education, as a systematic way of increasing economic competitiveness.

Education, at all levels, is important in empowering and developing the people of a nation; its importance on the population’s social, intellectual, and economic capital is undeniable. As the impact of globalization becomes more apparent, especially for developing countries, the need for more effective education systems becomes more relevant. Although all areas of education—basic, primary, secondary, higher, and adult education—are certainly worthy of attention, the focus of this paper is on lifelong learning within the context of higher education or post-secondary education in Jamaica.

Purpose

There is a plethora of research and policy documents related to lifelong learning and lifelong education. However, the majority of what has been written relates primarily to Europe, North America, Canada, and Australia (Jarvis, 2004; Merrill, 1999; Oliver, 1999). There is a significant gap in the literature on how lifelong learning, particularly through universities, is being influenced and shaped by contemporary trends. For example, in much of the Caribbean islands, universities play a significant role in promoting lifelong learning; yet this phenomenon remains unexplored. Taking Jamaica as an example, therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the concept of lifelong learning in Jamaica and to situate it within the context of higher education, highlighting some of the associated challenges and recent trends in the field. To achieve this, the article is divided into three parts.

The first section of the article provides a historical overview of Jamaica’s higher education system while the second presents the context of changing national demographics in education with a discussion of the challenges related to funding and accessibility. The third segment discusses the concept of lifelong learning and offers a snapshot of the emergent higher education system, which features a significant rise in the number of offshore universities on the island. The article concludes with commentary on the implications of these emergent trends on lifelong learning for Jamaica from which global lessons can be learned.

Historical Overview of Higher Education in Jamaica

Life in Jamaica has been largely influenced by colonialism and its persistence even after independence from Britain in 1962. This has framed the culture, context, organization, and scope of the education system. Essentially, Jamaica’s education system and its administration practices were formatted on the British education system. Great Britain’s latter educational policies in her colonies were designed (in theory) for the local needs of human resource development. Interestingly, this was in contrast to the original British educational premise of
education for the elite (Clatworthy, 1969). As such, there was a need for a complicated balance between allocating resources from capital investment (for colonial profit) to an educational effort (for improving human resource development). Throughout the years, Jamaica’s education system, which is administered and delivered through the Ministry of Youth, Education and Culture (MOYEC), has continued to model this system, albeit with more recent modifications accounting for responses to the demand for a local and regional identity as well as to trends in the global market.

Jamaica’s education system consists of early childhood (i.e. basic, infant and nursery), primary (i.e. elementary), secondary (i.e. high), and tertiary (i.e. higher education) schools. Enrollment figures are highest at the primary level and decrease significantly for tertiary education. According to the Ministry of Education (2008), the gross enrollment rates were, “94.5 per cent, 93.4 percent and 31.5 per cent respectively” (p. 9). Remarkably, the enrollment figures for males showed a similar decrease when reviewing the enrollment trends for each level.

Government funded tertiary level education, according to the Jamaica Information Service (JIS) (2010), is offered at The University of the West Indies (Mona Campus); The University of Technology, previously The College of Art Science and Technology (CAST); six teacher training colleges, seven multi-disciplinary Colleges (Community Colleges), The College of Agriculture, Science and Education (CASE), and the Edna Manley College of Visual Arts. Higher education in Jamaica also includes Vocational Training Centers as well as other privately run Universities and Colleges.

The launching pad for higher education was the organization of Jamaica’s first two universities during the nineteenth century. According to Gordon (1985),

The first never recruited enough students to make it a going proposition. A later and somewhat more successful effort revolved around Jamaica High School, which was renamed Jamaica College; during its existence from 1889 to 1901, thirty students graduated. (p. 16)

Jamaica College, which was purposed to provide secondary education for boys who could gain acceptance to University of London, today operates as a prominent all-male secondary school. The first regional institution of higher learning, The University of the West Indies, was established in 1948 (Roberts, 2001, p. 427) in Kingston, Jamaica. This was a special partnership with the University of London, but the institution achieved Independent University status in 1962. Total enrollment for the University of West Indies, during the period between 1948 and 1998, went from 33 to 22, 292, respectively. The country’s first private and technology institutions, namely Northern Caribbean University and University of Technology respectively, were officially recognized as universities in the 1990s. The University of Technology, as Roberts (2001) indicates operates as a state college where the focus remains “on technical and vocational education at the technician level, academic programmes for university preparation, and various components of, or full, degree programmes” (p. 23). These institutions provided the foundation for the higher education system in Jamaica.

Admission into a Jamaican institution of higher learning is primarily dependent upon standardized test scores, which are assessed based on the type of exam and the score received on particular subjects for the exam (International Association of Universities, 2004). The two primary exams are the General Certificate of Education Advanced ‘A’ Level or Ordinary ‘O’
Level and the Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate. According to the International Association of Universities (2004) online database, institutions may stipulate the number of subjects needed to be passed and which subjects are required for admission. In addition to these requirements, some schools require English proficiency and have a minimum age requirement. Jamaica, like other countries continues to experience societal changes as a result of globalization and these changes have impacted the field of education on the island.

**Accessibility and Funding to Higher Education in Jamaica**

Just as the history of higher education in Britain is overshadowed by inequalities (Blackburn & Jarman, 1993; Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Halsey, 1993) so too are the histories of higher education in former colonies. In many countries of the Latin American and Caribbean region, higher education was primarily provided and financed by the state and even until as recent as the early 20th century remained reserved for the elite. Providing an example in the University of the West Indies (UWI), Roberts (2001) suggested the university embodied the model of elite higher education. Only a small privileged group was able to afford tertiary education, but since the 1960’s with the dawning of national independence from Britain, significant changes started taking place in higher education in Jamaica.

According to Roberts (2001), although UWI remained relatively inaccessible, enrollment increased “from 93 in 1948, to 622 in 1958, 4216 in 1968, 8531 in 1978, 11,896 in 1988 and 18,058 in 1996” (p. 427). Jamaica has started to experience even more significant change in tertiary education. Within the past decade, there has been a shift from heavy reliance on public-funded institutions to a significant influx of diversified institutions. This has resulted in a switch from elite institutions to a wide variety of tertiary institutions, which provide diverse offerings for students and faculty. With several offshore universities and private enterprise, the island nation’s experiences are similar to the rest of the region and the world. In 1996, in the Anglophone Caribbean, along with a regional university, there were about 120 tertiary level institutions and including a regional university and three national universities, two of which were in Jamaica.

The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ, 2012, para. 3), the nation’s main accreditation body, boasts that it has registered 50 tertiary institutions (public and private) since 1987. Despite insisting that these institutions adhere to requirements and meet stated criteria of educational quality, the UCJ has met opposition for the drastic increase in the number of tertiary level universities in the country. Cooper (2009), while acknowledging the long held monopoly of tertiary education by UWI, suggested that with the rapid increase and accreditation of these institutions, some of which are not focused on academic rigor and research, Jamaica’s tertiary education is being devalued. In addition, as of “March 2011, the UCJ has registered 50 tertiary institutions (public and private) that have met the stated criteria of educational quality. The Council also currently monitors 200 programmes which it has accredited, including 24 offered by 11 overseas institutions” (para.3). The influx of associations and partnerships with local institutions is also increasing the number of offerings and institutions of higher learning in Jamaica. Another noteworthy trend is the increase in the internationalization of higher education and particularly the growth in the number of private, for-profit institutions across the island.
Increase in Private Institutions

Private universities and other institutions are wearing away at the state monopoly on higher education, which is an important transformation in higher education in Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean. This trend of private sector growth has a significant effect on higher education as it creates pressure for change, particularly as it relates to access and financing of higher education. Steier (2003) cites the source of this pressure as the increase of economic liberalism, growing political pluralism and a rising public demand for tertiary education- a result of demographic growth and of increased access at lower educational levels that has outstripped the governments’ capacity to pay for provision of education at higher levels. (p. 159)

In regards to financing, there is a changing face to the structure of higher education funding and financing, much of which is attributable to the growth of the private sector and demand for alternative sources of funding in the region and around the world.

Worldwide, the increasing number of private institutions has resulted in a far-reaching change in the traditional way in which education has been funded. Students and higher education institutions remained dependent on the state for a very long time. The increase in the number of private institutions, and particularly the increase in demand for higher education, emphasizes the state’s inability to maintain a consistent level of provision and financing for higher education. As a result, fees and cost-sharing programs are becoming commonplace in traditionally funded public universities. Further, Steier (2003) adds,

Government funding for tertiary education has declined in relative (and sometimes absolute) terms, forcing countries and institutions to consider alternative sources of funding and modes of provision. In particular, the growth of private institutions in response to rising demand has been much more rapid in developing countries than in most OECD countries… For the region as a whole, enrolment in private institutions represents more than 40 percent of the total student population. (pp. 359-361)

It is important to note too that the private sector, through industry, dictates industry standards and demands for trained labor, which is pivotal in terms of a country’s competitiveness and overall development. The private sector is also critical in encouraging a country’s innovation and competition on a global scale by expanding economic opportunity and creating value. Closely related to the economic argument of education is the labour market argument and private institutions, whether university or non-university level, enhance diversity of offerings available to students. Consequently, there is an increase in the number of teaching staff required to fulfill this demand.

In Jamaica, the University of the West Indies, the Caribbean’s first regional university, was also for a privileged few. Today, with the increasing demand for tertiary education, the demographic has changed. According to Schwartzman (1993), financing is no longer the sole responsibility of the state and the expansion has resulted in an enormous incorporation of women and nontraditional or working students, further compounding the financing woes. With this
change in demographic, Jamaica’s experience is similar to that of the rest of the world where there are more women in college than men.

Further, as demand for tertiary level education grows, it continues to be expensive to maintain, on many levels. These expenses are attributable not only to an increased number of students, but also to the rising number of academic and administrative staff. As is expected with increased enrollments in the region, the number of teaching staff also increased. Tertiary education remains expensive; despite an increase in heterogeneity in providers especially because of the excess demand, financing proves challenging. This has forced universities to be creative in funding strategies such as entrance examinations, high fees, cost sharing and rationing.

While this expansion represents a positive shift for education, for marginalized groups (women, some of the poor) and for the overall development of a country’s human capital, it is not free from ridicule and problems as the region strives to maintain educational standards. This results in a calling for a focus on quality assurance and rigor; however, it represents a positive shift for individual countries and for the region as a whole. The emphasis for Jamaica must be on quality assurance while paying keen attention to the role of the global market and competition. This shift is a positive one for the country as well, in line with the government’s efforts to transform the nation into a lifelong learning society.

**Lifelong Learning in Jamaica**

Lifelong learning is a generic term, which can be interpreted in many ways; in honing in on a specific interpretation, we use a broad definition for lifelong learning in this paper as we discuss the concept within the context of Jamaica. According to Longworth and Davies (1997),

> lifelong learning is the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetime and to apply them with confidence, creativity, and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments. (p. 22)

Education and its relationship to national economic development are not new and it will continue. Lifelong learning is an important strategy for success and economic survival.

According to Biesta (2008), many individuals see the new educational order of lifelong learning as closely connected to the new economic order of global capitalism in which lifelong learning is the main instrument in the construction of a flexible workforce. Biesta continues to explain that lifelong learning has now moved from the rights of individuals to a duty, which is something, governments now more than ever demand from their citizens. Utilizing these conceptualizations as a framework, we explored lifelong learning in Jamaica.

In their case study on lifelong learning in Jamaica, Blank and McArdle (2003) indicated that many social indicators in Jamaica were equivalent with underdeveloped countries. According to their report, primary school enrollment is near universal and secondary enrollment is higher than other lower-middle income countries. The problem however, surfaces as adult literacy levels in Jamaica (79.9%) are compared with other lower-middle income countries,
which average 85.3% (Blank & McArdle, 2003, p. 2). The data shows that Jamaica is doing relatively well in the area of childhood education, but fails to show results at the adult literacy level. This means that in their earlier life, students are attending school but fail to achieve fundamental literacy at an acceptable level during adulthood.

Despite improvements in access to education, quality and relevance continue to be inadequate and as such the education system has never been particularly successful when measured by rates such as pass rates and literacy levels (Blank & McArdle, 2003). According to the Planning Institute of Jamaica (as cited in Blank & McArdle, 2003, p. 4), approximately two-thirds of individuals, aged 34, have no academic qualifications (measured by examination passes) and this statistic continues to increase with the age of the individuals; 80% of employed and unemployed workers have no vocational, technical or professional training; and 20% of Jamaican adults are illiterate with another 15% percent possessing only basic literacy skills. Fox (2003, p. 12) reported that approximately 142,000 youth are out of school and work with 25% of these youths not progressing beyond grade nine. This means that there were severe challenges in the sector that required attention. To address this lack of achievement, a holistic approach towards lifelong learning which addresses enrollment as well as a critical review of the existing curriculum and pedagogy was required.

Jamaica has many years’ experience in addressing issues of illiteracy; as early as 1943 literacy classes were held on the island and in 1973, the Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL) was initiated to formally address illiteracy issues. In 2006, JAMAL became the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL) specifically to deal with illiteracy as well as to form a link between the formal school system and the facilities to make persons into more productive members of society. The new organization commenced full operation in 2007 (Ministry of Education, 2008). This initiative, in response to the changing global demands, seeks to address issues beyond illiteracy, beyond formal education, ensuring that Jamaican citizens have the opportunity to be productive lifelong learners in society.

Industry Implications and Strategies for Lifelong Learning

In addition to the meager results being attained in the primary and secondary schools, there is a great need for the highest quality workforce. This is mainly due to a shift in the global market, which caused a shift from the industrial or goods producing sector to the service sector. The implication of this shift results in the need to retool those who lose their jobs during the shift so that they are equipped to fit in a service sector that is driven by globalization. This shows that educational structure and lifelong learning process have serious social and economic implications and is in great dilemma.

The government of Jamaica clearly identifies learning as a lifelong process. However, lifelong learning was formerly viewed in the context of remedial education and adult literacy and not within the education and skills training for all ages (Blank & McArdle, 2003). Today, the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning along with community colleges and private institutions provide advancement programs for entry into tertiary institutions or for employment (Blank & McArdle, 2003). There still remained a gap in the early 1980s to provide education for the grade nine students who had not completed high school and were out of the formal education system as also those individuals who need to change sectors in order to compete with the global trend of the workforce. Based on this need, the Human
Employment and Resource Training National Training Agency (HEART Trust/NTA) was created. According to Blank and McArdle (2003, p. 8), the main objective was to work in conjunction with the Ministry of Education Youth and Culture and JAMAL (now JFLL) to develop a High School Equivalency Program that will enable those individuals who failed to complete high school and obtain a certification of academic competency.

Additionally, Blank and McArdle (2003, p. 8), noted that HEART operates ten academies and specialized institutions, 16 vocational training centers and two on-the-job training programs: the School Leavers Training Opportunities Program (SL-TOPS) and the Apprenticeship Program. A TVET (Technical, Vocational, Educational and Training) Resource Center is responsible for curriculum and program development while the Vocational Training Development Institute (VTDI) provides training for instructors and TVET professionals and managers. HEART monitors and funds (by way of subventions) approximately 100 community based training programs.

The Workplace Improvement Program (WIP) assists firms in identifying training needs and implements training programs to upgrade the skills of existing employees in organizations. This approach adopted by HEART takes in the entire needs of the individual and if continued on the same trend should satisfy the major needs for lifelong learning in the Jamaican context. Although the absolute numbers of persons enrolled in higher-level training has increased, targets for increased enrollment in higher-level courses have not been met (Blank & McArdle, 2003). This may be due to the fact that HEART is structured to function as a training provider rather than a provider of lifelong learning for most of the participants.

There is a prerequisite for Jamaica, if she is to successfully participate in a global knowledge economy, to maintain supply of highly skilled workers whose training adequately matches the world’s shifting demand for certain skills. Education in a knowledge economy becomes a never-ending cycle that complements and reinforces academic studies or vocational training creates the process of lifelong learning (Kuznetsov & Dalhman, 2008). Further, bringing the higher education system up to standard initiates a positive direction towards lifelong learning, so the next step is to point out some strategies introduced for the implementation of lifelong learning. Kuznetsov and Dalhman (2008) noted how lifelong learning provides individuals throughout their lives—from childhood to retirement—a spectrum of non-formal and formal learning opportunities.

Lifelong Learning: A Necessary Strategy for Developing Nations

The ability to develop a stronger lifelong learning model in Jamaica is possible but with many challenges. Challenges include the limited financial capacity of the government; disbursement of needed funds to different levels of the lifelong learning process is also limited and sometimes unequally disbursed. This makes expenditure per student inadequate and thus limits the outcome of the process. Since the Jamaican government is unable to fund the entire demand for higher education on the island, the entrance of transnational corporations and universities is seen as one of the of the solutions for this dilemma. The government cannot be solely responsible for funding higher education.

While the basic framework for lifelong learning is present in Jamaica due to organizations like JFLL, HEART, universities, colleges, and other private organizations, much work needs to be done to ensure greater access to funding and educational opportunities for the
wider population. The HEART Trust/NTA is responsible for financing and delivering much public pre-employment training in Jamaica. Programs offered by HEART are financed through a three percent tax on the wage bill of enterprises. HEART also realizes some revenues from fees to trainees and/or companies (Blank & McArdle, 2003). In addition to this funding by HEART, employers bear a significant share of the training costs.

The development of a pervasive lifelong learning strategy requires a policy framework that allows learners to move freely between programs and to enter and exit programs with ease. Blank & McArdle (2003) stated that the MOYEC has overall responsibility for education and training, including portfolio responsibility for HEART; The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) has responsibility for certifying learning in and accrediting tertiary institutions; and The Council of Community Colleges of Jamaica supervises and coordinates the work of the Community Colleges. As a result of these efforts, conflicts are created (Blank & McArdle, 2003). For example, all community colleges currently offer vocational programs and are open for expansion. This would allow for an increased access to training and ultimately, through an articulated program to lifelong learning. However, the UCJ will withhold accreditation if more than 25% of the courses are not offerings from tertiary level. Although the framework for lifelong learning exist in Jamaica it is still obvious that there is no marked pathway for the movement of individuals along the lifelong learning road. The government and the MOYEC must outline the transitional path that will ultimately lead to lifelong learning for all.

**Conclusion**

The pressures to restructure higher education are not unique to Jamaica and the call for serious changes influence the way universities and other institutions of higher education are funded and governed. Globalization and its forces have resulted, over the past two decades, in a marked decline in the state as the main largest player in the education system in many developing countries (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002). The premise of this article is that globalization has greatly influenced the context of higher education and lifelong learning globally, and Jamaica’s experience can be instructive for other countries with a similar experience. The article focuses on higher education as an element of lifelong learning and the importance of a holistic lifelong learning strategy.

Given the case of Jamaica, there is an impressive growth in enrollments, numbers and natures of higher education institutions resulting in increased institutional differentiation and even more privatization. Jamaica has made a noble attempt at defining lifelong learning and a model for its implementation in Jamaica, particularly through the partnerships between the HEART Trust/NTA and the private sector, as well as the increase in the number of offshore universities and private institutions of higher education. This framework or structure of the lifelong learning shows that there are efforts being made to assists Jamaicans to move fluidly from one institution to the next. Such a framework needs policy decisions upon which the government may build. The institutions are present to address the need for a coherent pathway into lifelong learning and not just acquiring a skill or improving the literacy level. In Jamaica the need for lifelong learning is addressed through institutions such as HEART Trust and the community colleges and with the newly mandated JFLL, there is more of a transparent path to
transcend from one institution to the next. The continuum of lifelong learning is critically important, particularly as it relates to access to lifelong learning opportunities.

There is a platform for funding some aspects of lifelong learning in Jamaica; a three percent tax on the wage bill of enterprises but more is needed to supply the need for lifelong learning of the population. With the present trend in the global environment, there is a beckoning on the country’s doors to answer this call to increase economic competitiveness in a systematic way. With a rise in the availability of lifelong learning as a strategy, this will lead to much needed industrial and social capital development.

To conclude, it is probable that Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean region is facing a historic juncture in which the context of neo-liberal policies, technological development, knowledge-based human capital, and competition set the stage for higher education. This requires a critical examination of issues related to access and inclusivity to a flexible, sustainable, and dynamic supply of lifelong learning opportunities supported by a framework of cooperative governance. As other nations struggle with a downturn in the world economy, lifelong learning presents itself as a unique opportunity to begin bridging the gap between illiteracy and literacy, developing an unskilled to a skilled labor force, as well a stepping stone for economic sufficiency and competitiveness.

References


