



Collaboration in Higher Education: A Perspective from the Caribbean

by David Rampersad*

While geography has helped to facilitate collaboration among higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Caribbean, history and language have tended to circumscribe it. However, there is growing recognition that collaboration, especially through research and mobility programmes, can advance institutional capacity building and successful knowledge transfer. Although funding for collaboration has not been bountiful, existing schemes have undoubtedly encouraged it and can have greater impact if increased.

The University of the West Indies (UWI), which serves the Commonwealth Caribbean, views collaboration as a stimulus for development and has been its principal proponent in the region. It has been strengthening its relationships with HEIs in its contributing countries so that it can assist more effectively in their development. Its institutional mechanisms, headed by the Office of Research and the Central Office for Regional and International Affairs, reinforce its ability to lead, or participate in, partnerships or consortia with other HEIs that seek support for research and mobility programmes from the European Union (EU) and other funding agencies. Such programmes enable the partners to pool their expertise to address issues of common concern, engage effectively in the international research community, and strengthen institutional capacity. The EU-funded project on Mainstreaming Energy Efficiency and Climate Change in Built Environment Training and Research in the Caribbean for instance was led by The UWI. Its regional partners included the University of Guyana (UG), Anton de Kom University of Suriname and the University of Technology (Jamaica). University consortia such as the UWI and the Caribbean Universities of Colombia (SUE Caribe) also engage in research collaboration of mutual interest.

Staff and student mobility programmes not only help to accelerate knowledge transfer and capacity development by enabling the beneficiaries to acquire new knowledge and experiences, or gain access to facilities or expertise that are not available in their own institutions. By ensuring that individuals from various institutions become acquainted with each other's expertise and by encouraging the acquisition of foreign language skills, these programmes reinforce existing relationships, create new ones and enable participating institutions to pool their strengths to undertake projects that contribute to national and regional development.

Many HEIs in the region have therefore supported mobility activities using their own resources while externally funded programmes, including those supported by the EU such as the CARPIMS (Caribbean and Pacific Islands Mobility Schemes), provide additional impetus. The CARPIMS, for instance, have been led by the UWI and have included, among Caribbean HEIs, UG, the University of Belize, the Université d'Etat d'Haiti, and the Instituto Tecnológico de Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic) as well as a European partner, the Universidade do Porto (Portugal).

While other EU-funded programmes such as EDULINK, the ACP Programme for Science and Technology and the ACP Caribbean and Pacific Research Programme for Sustainable Development have helped to expand the scope of collaboration, a dedicated system of support is required for sustainable programmes of joint research, infrastructure development to facilitate such research, postdoctoral fellowships and staff and student mobility. The establishment of a Research and Innovation Funding Agency which promotes research and innovation and links researchers to industry will not only strengthen the research capacity of Caribbean HEIs but will also enable them to seek external support for further research. It will increase their research management and project management expertise and ensure efficient knowledge transfer and uptake of results. Since regional governments are generally unable to provide the requisite level of financial support, resources from other funders are required to establish the proposed agency.

Similarly, while international programmes such as the Marie Skodlowska-Curie programme facilitate student mobility, a programme dedicated to the Caribbean is required to ensure significant developmental impact. A regional credit transfer standard is also necessary to guide comparison of the levels of attainment and performance of students, given the variety of systems that exist, and one that has the potential to develop into a credit accumulation scheme.

Despite the tradition of collaboration among Caribbean HEIs and between them and EU HEIs which has had an impact on capacity building, the human development and the infrastructural deficit in the Caribbean stymies the expansion of sustainable relationships. Targeted support which recognises the special needs of countries such as those in the Caribbean and includes actions to facilitate a greater participation rate, will strengthen Caribbean HEIs so that they can participate more effectively in EU-funded programmes. Moreover, given the need to ensure that the interests of higher education is taken into account in the formulation of public policy, national and regional organisations engaged in higher education and research must undertake on-going advocacy to ensure the adoption of policies and strategies that advance their cause.

Much has been accomplished by Caribbean HEIs through collaboration. If they are to continue to play a sustainable leadership role in national and regional development, capacity building and funding must be addressed urgently.

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