

Transforming Education Summit (TES)
National Consultation Report
Commonwealth of Dominica¹

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Introduction

The Commonwealth of Dominica knows all too well the meaning of resilience and the benefits to be had from building back better and smarter. In 2017 when the island was decimated by hurricane Maria, many entertained the thought that perhaps Dominica would be rendered unviable as a state, on account of the extent and magnitude of the destruction. “Whither goes Dominica!” was the overarching sentiment and dominated much of the commentary in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane. But here we are, with Dominica in effect, getting back on its knees and standing tall, again. Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit from the onset had committed to building back better and stronger, a theme that since then has undergirded the social development agenda of the country.

The recent challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, saw Dominica rising to the occasion again. Admittedly, like many other countries, while caught unawares, and not having the requisite resources to respond to an exogenous shock of that magnitude, was forced to be innovative so as to minimize the impact of the pandemic on the education sector, which is the area of concern for this year’s summit on transforming education.

Long before UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres undertook to rally the global community to respond to and craft prescriptions to correct the various maladies plaguing the education system globally (many of which long preceded COVID-19), Dominica had already assumed the proactive stance of engaging stakeholders to review the island’s response to the pandemic, and to endeavour to engineer a new direction for the country, and the education sector in particular.

In that regard, therefore, by the time the UN SG Antonio Guterres issued a clarion call for the global community to take a critical look at the education system, Dominica had already initiated dialogue with stakeholder agencies and parties both in the public and private sectors and with international organisations. The goal was to address some of the issues that threaten to cripple the system, or reverse gains made previously, and to correct, strengthen and bolster the areas that needed urgent intervention.

National Consultation Convened

The convening of a global conference – Transforming Education Summit (TES) - in September 2022, has afforded Dominica the opportunity to prioritize some of the issues of concern and to address these even more specifically in the context of the national consultations held as a pre-cursor to TES in September 2022.

National consultations were held over a two (2) day period in July of 2022. Stakeholders from the public and private sectors, civil society and international

organizations² participated. The diversity of the group ensured that in accordance with TES guidelines that a whole of Government approach was adopted, that there was youth participation³ and the demographic spread afforded participation from males, females, youth and persons of various ethnic and social backgrounds.

Consultation focus and outcomes

Much of the discussion revolved around the following issues:

1. Engendering diversity in the classroom:

The key concern here was, is the education system fully integrating students/ or preparing them to participate meaningfully in a more diverse society? Further, questions were raised about how inclusive is the education system for migrants (so that migrant parents and children do not feel excluded). Moreover, are teachers adequately equipped to deliver effectively recognising that for some migrant students, English may be their second language. Therefore, one of the key recommendations was the need for training teachers in communities that have large migrant populations to deliver in English as a second language (acknowledging that in some areas Chinese, Spanish, French Lexicon Creole, French was the first or dominant language of students).

2. Strengthening and expanding the TVET offering

Further to TVET being offered as a core academic pursuit, it should be taught within the context of “skills for life” as well. Immersive learning opportunities – internships, should be encouraged, to better prepare students for work/life.

The stigmatisation of TVET as a professional track was an area that attracted much exchange. It was largely agreed that urgent intervention is required to correct notions that technical and vocational skills are less valuable or lucrative. Moreover, one ought not to view TVET as a lesser academic pursuit requiring less intellectual prowess. Additionally, calls were made for the expansion of TVET offerings in schools.

In a similar vein, the meetings considered how to make agriculture more attractive or lucrative, hence a viable professional option,

² Participants in day 2 of the TES National Consultation in Dominica included UN Office representatives (International Organisation for Migration IOM; UNESCO, UNICEF etc

³ Various student and youth groups were represented

especially against the backdrop of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and concerns for food security.

3. Re-introducing and/or strengthening the Civics program

A healthy discussion ensued about the value of teaching civics in school for the shaping of identity, conflict management, tolerance, team building skills, anger management and peer mediation.

4. Encouraging greater private sector involvement and investment.

5. Re-imagining education

It was widely agreed that notwithstanding the horror of the disease COVID-19 and its attendant challenges, that it has afforded Dominica a fantastic opportunity to take a deep dive into the sector and to address some perennial issues and some more recent challenges.

6. Engineering and adopting a more holistic approach to education.

Very often deliberations on the education system tend to focus on pedagogic matters. It was rather encouraging to note the emphasis on adopting a holistic approach to education, recognizing the value of developing the various facets of the human being.

7. Providing more psychosocial support:

Passionate accounts of the toll that COVID-19 had on teachers and students in particular and reports of child abuse led to vociferous calls for greater psychosocial support within the school system. It was recommended that there be more opportunities for guidance counselling; engage substitute parenting in schools and engage social workers. A concern was raised about the need to engage with students, especially boys who have had traumatic experiences.

8. Catering for students who have special needs:

There was a great deal of attention given to the topic of “special education” and how to improve the educational experience afforded that particular group of students. How to better prepare the education system – teachers, parents and students themselves to deal with learning challenges and special needs attracted significant discourse, with the conclusion being that greater effort has to be made to train teachers in special education and there was an urgent

need to build specialised learning facilities to accommodate these students.

9. Encouraging parents to play a greater role in school governance and their children's education.

The debate that ensued also extended to developing capacity and networking. For example, how to harness resources (material, time, technical know-how) within the communities; resource mapping of persons and entities within communities and how best to leverage networks for the benefit of our students' educational development.

10. Measuring quality education (education system)?

It was interesting to note the many and varied interpretations of what can be perceived as "quality" education. There were many ambitious benchmarks articulated which were tempered largely by the appreciation for the limited resources in the country.

11. Digital education:

Much of the discussion on reimagining education hovered around the accelerated integration of technology in teaching and learning in Dominica; curricular reform and the professional development of teachers. There was some concern expressed about whether the online learning experience further marginalised some of our students and to what lengths would a learning recovery program have to go to narrow the learning loss incurred.

With respect to digital transformation in schools, there were urgent calls for the construction of digital classrooms; the purchase and distribution of devices to all age groups within the education system, digital education for teachers and students and retrofitting of existing school plants to accommodate the infusion of digital learning technologies.

The point was very well established that in order to maximise current investments in e-education, the strengthening of the telecommunications infrastructural backbone was critical. Additionally, the cost of utilities such as electricity and internet services still proves prohibitive to many, a situation which is further exacerbated by geographic considerations and the existence of or non-existence of the telecommunications infrastructure.

Further discussion was had on the following sub-topics:

- Establishing community hubs to allow for access to the internet – for the wider public and students as well, which may also prove helpful to adult learners;
- Engendering a culture where educational technology becomes part of the investment in the education of the child;
- Bridging the digital divide – especially the rural urban digital divide and
- Exploring whether parents will be receptive to procuring e-books or technological tools as part of the educational tools for students.

12. Infusing green technology into schools.

A very compelling case was made for embracing green technologies in the construction of new schools to make them more climate resilient, energy efficient and to maximise solar power to help reduce the cost of utilities such as water and electricity and to consider rain harvesting as well.

In acknowledging the disastrous effects the digital divide had on the learning experience of students, one proposed solution was to establish community centres; libraries; ICT centres etc – which can be outfitted with technology – in effect, being converted into smart learning centres to expand internet access to students and their parents.

Conclusion

While the national consultations were greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm there was measured expectations when juxtaposed against the financial investment required to realise the expressed ambition or vision. In that regard, concerns were expressed about the willingness and capacity of the international community and the international organisations in particular to fund the requisite programs necessary to bring about the paradigmatic changes envisaged.

Notwithstanding, the expectation is that the TES promises new hope and opportunity for funding in education to finance the various programs that will help to halt and reverse learning loss, but very importantly also accelerate efforts geared towards achieving the various ambitions expressed in SDG#4.