

THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL OF JAMAICA

The Contemporary Higher Education Landscape in Jamaica

1.0 Background

Higher Education is fundamental to the social, economic and cultural health of the nation. It contributes not only through intellectual development; equipping graduates for work life, but also adds to the world's knowledge and skill capital (The Dearing Committee, 1997). As contemporary society embraces new frontiers of thinking and technological advancement, the nature of education continues to evolve and to redefine itself. The parameters within which tertiary-level education have been traditionally defined in the Jamaican education system have shifted and the outcomes it seeks to achieve continue to change (The University Council of Jamaica, 2017b). This paper highlights important features of the evolution of the Jamaican higher education sector.

2.0 The University Council of Jamaica

The University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) is the national External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA) for higher education in Jamaica. As its core business, the UCJ facilitates institutional registration and the review of institutions, programmes and short courses for accreditation and recognition. By its very nature, quality assurance represents a process of various forms of quality monitoring, evaluation and review to establish stakeholder confidence that an institution or higher education provision measures up to international educational standards.

In fulfilment of its mission, the UCJ facilitates:

1. the development of a system capable of responding more effectively to the country's changing human resource needs; and
2. greater articulation among institutions constituting the higher education system.

To support these goals, it is important to have a clear understanding of how the concepts of tertiary and higher education have been defined in Jamaica.

3.0 Understanding the Evolution of Tertiary Education and Higher Education

Tertiary education has had a long history in Jamaica. The term has historically been used to refer to the types of institutions populating the sector and to the level of programmes offered (Jamaica



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Education Sector Survey, 1977, p.18). With increasing evidence of the wider use of the concept of *higher education* globally, however, Jamaica has begun to embrace contemporary discourse surrounding these concepts and to give focus to the goals of providers and of learners in the higher education landscape (UCJ TQF, 2019).

3.1 Tertiary education is defined as the third stage or level in the education system following the completion of secondary education (UCJ, 2019) (Evans & Burke, 2006; Holding & Burke, 2005; Howe & Strauss, 2000). In Jamaica, the secondary stage is usually marked by the completion of Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC) subjects, which are a minimum requirement for matriculation into what are considered post-secondary and tertiary levels of the education system. In some contexts, tertiary education is classified with post-secondary education, building on completed secondary education (Evans & Burke, 2006, p.5). UNESCO (2012), however, critically distinguishes between post-secondary and tertiary education. UNESCO posits an alternative concept of 'Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education', aimed at the individual acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies lower than the level of complexity characteristic of tertiary education and more focused on preparation for labour market entry and tertiary matriculation (UNESCO, 2012, p.43).

3.2 Higher Education (HE) also represents the third level or stage of education that occurs after the completion of secondary education (UCJ, 2019). While HE intrinsically shares features with tertiary education, it has been argued that contemporary definitions speak to the concept now being broader in scope than tertiary education. Contemporary HE takes into account a wider cross-section of types of post-secondary and tertiary education than historical definitions dictated. This includes from the level of the undergraduate certificate up to the doctoral level. The concept of **higher education** traditionally carried an elitist connotation, often viewed as synonymous with "*University education*" - the university being an academic type of tertiary education institution that typically offers more advanced level academic programmes and teaching staff with terminal qualifications and engaged in research and publication. By connoting a pecking order for education, premised on traditional value systems that embrace the prestige of advanced levels of study, some critics have argued that the term *higher education* consequentially privileges particular types of institutions and strengthens classist sentiments, discriminating against others.

Higher education is therefore regarded as a more **inclusive** concept that transcends the aforementioned traditional notions that equate it to university education and which may operate in various forms. HE may reflect diverse institution types, programme levels and disciplines of study ranging from post-secondary to advanced tertiary levels.



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4.0 Constituents of the Jamaican Higher Education Sector

According to the UCJ Tertiary Qualifications Framework (UCJ, 2019), Jamaica's higher education sector reflects a diverse, semi-autonomous and independent composite of institutions and programmes.

The Planning Institute of Jamaica (2017) reports that institutions constituting the higher education sector include:

- **universities**
- **university colleges**
- **teachers' colleges**
- **speciality colleges** (in disciplines such as, the visual and performing arts, sports, business, agriculture, science and theology).

Based on environmental scanning and research conducted by the UCJ, the following types of institutions are also part of the Jamaican HE sector (UCJ, 2017a):

- **community colleges**, offering programmes from Grades 12 and 13 (Sixth Form) up to the post graduate level;
- **vocational training institutions** that offer the National Vocational Qualifications of Jamaica (NVQ-J) at Levels 3 and above;
- various forms of **technical speciality schools** that provide short-cycle education and training courses;
- **polytechnics**;
- **junior colleges**;
- **overseas institutions**, including both those with satellite campuses in Jamaica and online programmes; and
- **alternative providers and brokers**, involved in hosting other institution's programmes

This broader, contemporary understanding of the types of institutions operating within the HE sector is underscored in the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) definition of a **higher education institution** below:

An educational body which carries out higher education activities based on legally approved study programmes. Any higher education organization must follow an external evaluation procedure in order to assess its quality and to acquire the provisional functioning authorization, followed by its official accreditation ...Generally this requirement is



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compulsory for all higher education institutions (which) may differ in size, quality, resources, number of teaching staff and students...and can be either local or global; elite or mass-oriented; specialised or transdisciplinary, and may foster an academic culture or a business culture(UNESCO 2007).

Included among descriptions of the multiple varieties of higher education, UNESCO mentions "centres of research and culture, public and private", and asserts that these entities must be "approved through recognised accreditation systems or by the competent State authority" (Roberts, 2003, p.17). It is clear from the aforementioned definitions that, while embracing diversity in the sector, UNESCO regards the authenticity of HE as inextricably tied to State recognition and accreditation. In the case of Jamaica, the UCJ is the statutory authority with responsibility for external quality assurance (UCJ, 2019).

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