

## **The Changing Landscape of Adult Learning and Education in Jamaica: Fifty Years and Beyond**

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### **Introduction**

Throughout the course of the history of the development of nations, education has been regarded as a crucial investment and an engine for growth. This public good view of education is no different in the case of Jamaica. Consequently, as the country sought to transform its economic system from an agrarian dependent to an industrialized system, the education of its population played a crucial role in ensuring that the human resource needed to assure its development goals and the economic advancement of the country was available.

Writers such as Olaniyan & Okemakinde (2008) and McGrath (2010) make the point that education creates improved citizens and as such aids in the improvement of the general standard of living in a society. Education has been further conceived of as an enabling factor that opens up varied avenues of personal, community and national development. Jamaica has therefore been making continuous efforts to improve literacy and adult basic education, workforce education, and human and resource development through national policy and educational initiatives. This paper captures some of these initiatives and examines the changes in the Jamaican context that have informed these actions over the last 50 years.

### **The National Context**

Jamaica is a part of the Anglo-Caribbean countries, located in the central Caribbean approximately 90 miles from Cuba and 100 miles from Haiti. It is the largest of the English-speaking Caribbean islands and is the largest demographic unit of the region with a population of approximately 2.93 million. Jamaica is categorized as an upper middle-income economy, with a

GDP per capita of USD 5,582 (2019). However, its long-term macroeconomic context has been characterized by low growth, high public debt, and exposure to external shocks (World Bank Group & UNICEF, 2021). Jamaica shares a heritage of British colonization which lasted for over 300 years, along with other British Caribbean neighbours (Sherlock & Bennett, 1998). After emancipation, Jamaica, like its other Caribbean counterparts continued to be ruled by the British Monarchy under a Crown Colony form of government obtaining independence in 1962.

Miller and Murray (1977) noted that “with the advent of independence came the need for Jamaica to develop a new and viable economy no longer based on plantation agriculture and the marketing of a few main crops” (p. 82). This called for a diversification of the Jamaican economy. Consequently, the 1970s marked a shift in the Jamaican economy from agriculture to services.

### **Literacy a National Focus**

One of my favourite phrases within the context of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) is that adult education responds to its context. Given the context of the 1970s in Jamaica the focus was on building the nation’s economic base and more importantly, moving the economy from an agrarian base to an industrial and service base. This was important because of Jamaica’s history as a sugar plantation society under British Colonization.

A critical component of any country’s economic base is its human resource. Consequently, when in 1971 a study conducted by the Literacy Evaluation and Planning Committee with support from UNESCO showed that almost half of the nation’s population at the time (500,000) was illiterate, a legacy of the slave plantation and colonial period, the government saw this as a grave problem that would hinder the development of the newly independent state (Barrett, 2014). The government was resolute on challenging what existed at the time in order to conquer the future of the country. The prime minister of the day argued that “the half a million persons who were unable to read and write were blocked off from most of the normal avenues of economic opportunity and suffered tremendous disabilities”. He therefore argued that “in such a situation the chance of economic advancement for the country was also blocked which therefore left the entire society condemned to a lower standard of living than was necessary.” He further noted that “the door through which citizens march into full participation in the life of the country is the ability to read and write.” In recognition of the debilitating effect of illiteracy both at the individual and societal levels, the government took the decision to make literacy a national priority and as such to launch a vigorous and massive attack on illiteracy. This

decision gave rise to a national focus on literacy and the establishment of the National Literacy Board (NLB) in 1972 to implement the agenda to eradicate illiteracy. The NLB was soon replaced with the Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL). The new entity, JAMAL was established as a statutory agency under the Ministry of Education and Culture with primary responsibility for adult education in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The 1972 Ministry Paper that laid out the justification for the establishment of JAMAL stated that:

the government regards illiteracy as a grave and fundamental problem in Jamaican life. On the one hand illiteracy restricts freedom, self-reliance and potential for achieving true independence; and on the other hand, it impedes national progress by hindering the release and full utilization of human resources for economic and social development (JAMAL Foundation, 2008 p. 2).

The literacy agenda was therefore two-fold in focusing on personal growth of individuals and the promotion of a better society economically and socially. Given the fact that the greatest resource that Jamaica has is its people, then success in overcoming illiteracy was seen as removing one of the stumbling blocks to economic power. Learning to read and write, the government argued would release in persons self-confidence and a sense of self-reliance with the concomitant confidence being released within the society. Literacy for all was seen as the means by which the country would become a free, proud, educated society (Barrett, 2014).

Side by side with the JAMAL was the Jamaican Council for Adult Education (JACAE) whose formation was catalyzed by JAMAL. JACAE is a voluntary, non-profit organization whose members are individuals and organizations involved in a wide range of adult continuing education and lifelong learning activities. In its formative years its mission was “to promote the development of adult continuing education and lifelong learning for individual and national development and to unite adult educators in Jamaica.” Over the years JACAE collaborated with JAMAL, one of its founding members, to promote the importance of adult education and especially literacy. JAMAL’s work in literacy and the genesis and work in continuing adult education of JACAE had been inescapably linked over the years. For almost 30 years both JAMAL and JACAE have been members of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), an international NGO dedicated to promoting the right to education and learning for young people and adults. Through their membership in ICAE both entities have benefitted from their participation in various regional and global fora, events and initiatives focused on youth and adult education which

have served to strengthen their work locally through information sharing, skill development and access to educational resources.

### **Literacy and Work Skill Reclamation Thrust**

In 1979, in response to statistics that revealed that 20% (70,000) of the youth population, 15 – 20 years old, were unemployed and approximately 140 thousand were unskilled for the productive workforce or self-employment, the Literacy and Work Skill Reclamation Programme was launched. Funding for this programme was provided through the assistance of the World Food Programme (Barrett, 2014).

The main objective of this thrust was to make students employable as well as literate by taking them through various levels of academic training before sending them to a skills training institution. Unskilled, non-reading young adults would be placed in a full-time educational institution to receive intensive training in basic literacy and work skills to make them suitable for entry into the work world. Later on, in 1988 the literacy and skills programme was expanded to include all persons attending JAMAL literacy classes whether day or evening. Over an 18-month period, trainees were able to gain skills in various areas related to the needs of the productive sector (Barrett, 2014).

Once again, in response to changing global demands, JAMAL was transformed into the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL) in 2007. With the change in name came a change in mission and so the JFLL's mission was amended to read:

to provide, in partnership with other organizations, adult education programmes which would establish a culture of lifelong learning that would empower individuals and contribute to national development (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022).

As an agency of the Ministry of Education, JFLL was responsible for providing non-formal, basic and continuing education for the adult learner population. In addition to its responsibility to deal with illiteracy, this new entity was tasked to address issues beyond illiteracy, beyond formal education, ensuring that Jamaican citizens would have the opportunity to be productive lifelong learners in society. Unlike JAMAL, which focused primarily on the eradication of illiteracy, the JFLL was now focused on promoting lifelong learning through a combination of literacy, numeracy and life skills (Jamaica Information Service, 2008). The success of Jamaica's literacy programme is reflected in the fact that literacy in 2020 stood at 88.1 percent (UNESCO, 2021) representing a

significant improvement since the 1970s when only 50 per cent of adults were literate.

### **Workplace Literacy Thrust**

The strategy of the *Workplace Literacy* programme was to collaborate with manufacturers, and other types of producers, as well as the service sector to provide adult literacy education on the job to those who needed it. The approach sought to marry the resources of the private sector with the expertise of JFLL to train groups of people where they work and so to promote increased productivity in a meaningful way. The programmes were customized to meet the needs of the particular workforce. The process began with a simple 30-minute Diagnostic Test conducted by JFLL to determine the starting point. A confidential report was then shared with the relevant company outlining the findings and recommendations. The company then collaborated with JFLL to establish a plan of action based on the results. Classes were then scheduled at the convenience of the employers and their teams (JFLL Web). Through this programme, workforce training and certification was greatly improved.

### **Increased Focus on Skills Training for Youth and Adults**

In the 1980s as the country began to see growth in output and an expansion in employment opportunities, improvement in employment levels spread over most sectors leading to an increased need for skilled workers. Additionally, there was the need to ensure that the country could successfully participate in the global knowledge economy and maintain a supply of highly skilled workers whose training adequately matched the world's shifting demand within certain skill areas. Consequently, in 1982, building on the work done by the JFLL, the government of Jamaica sought to consolidate its skills training programme with the promulgation of the Human Employment and Resource Training Act (HEART Act). The Act allowed for the setting up of a 3% training levy and tax credit for on-the-job training. The HEART Trust which was reorganized into the HEART National Training Agency (HEART NTA) was consequently established with the mandate "to finance and regulate the training programmes with the objective of producing a skilled, certified workforce consistent with the needs of the economy and the labour market" (HEART Trust National Training Agency, Jamaica, n.d. p 20). These developments gave rise to a new non-formal system of skills training for youth and adults under which training academies were established tied to the investment and job creation initiative of the government at the time (McArdle, 2003). The HEART Trust NTA became the focal point to integrate efforts from all levels and served as "the facilitating and coordinating body for workforce

development in Jamaica, providing access to training, competence assessment and certification for all working age Jamaicans and offering career development and employment facilitation services across Jamaica” (UNESCO, 2021).

A key characteristic of developing nations such as Jamaica is its reliance on foreign donors to manoeuvre the tight fiscal space in which they operate. Consequently, even provision of education is often affected by donor requirements. One critical example of external donor impact on the provision of youth and adult education can be seen in the case of Jamaica responding to the requirements under the agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce the size of the public service. To that end, in 2019, Parliament passed an act merging the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning with three other government entities that provide education for youths and adults: *the HEART Trust NTA*, the *National Youth Service* and the *Apprenticeship Board of Jamaica* (Jamaica Information Service, 2019). Undoubtedly, this raised concerns that the merger would create an environment within which the strong, specialized focus on adult literacy, numeracy and basic education might be compromised. On the other hand, it was seen as an opportunity to promote a continuous process of learning and acquisition of levels of aptitude enabling learners to incorporate themselves in lifelong learning processes (UNESCO, 2015). In fact, the government argued that the merger of the functions and resources of the entities would solidify several benefits, including, but not limited to: the rationalisation of programmes and systems to meet efficiently and effectively the education and training needs of Jamaicans; the avoidance of duplication of administrative and other functions; the facilitation of the full alignment of remedial training, technical and vocational training and support of the employability skills programme; improvement of the quality of graduate output and expansion of training opportunities to unattached youth (youth who were not engaged in training or learning) and youth-at-risk in Jamaica (Jamaica Information Service, 2019). The Heart Trust NTA was subsequently rebranded the HEART National Service Training Agency Trust (HEART NSTA Trust).

Other important developments in recent years have been the development of the *High School Diploma Equivalency (HSDE)*, *National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J)*, the micro-credentials, *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)*, *Flexible Learning* pathways.

## **High School Diploma Equivalency (HSDE)**

The High School Diploma Equivalency programme was developed under the direction of the JFLL in 2013 in collaboration with the *Caribbean Examination Council (CXC)*, *E-Learning Jamaica*, the *Jamaican Library Service* and the *HEART Trust/NTA*. The goal of the *HSDE* is to equip youth and adult learners to achieve their personal, academic and professional goals; and thereby, supporting them to create thriving lives and sustainable communities. The *HSDE* is expected to equip recent school leavers and adults who are without the traditional qualifications usually acquired through the formal education system up to the secondary level with the certification necessary to matriculate in tertiary institutions or to get a job. The *HSDE* is a three-tiered programme comprising three distinct levels: Basic (Grades 1 to 6), Intermediate (Grades 7 to 9) and Proficiency (Grades 10 – 11) (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022). Once again, demonstrating the strong link to the economic agenda of the country, this programme was a direct response to the growing demand for education and skills training for the adult population. The programme seeks to improve outcomes for the adult learner through a solid foundation for the acquisition of skills needed to make them marketable, both locally and internationally. Participants are expected to complete courses in subject areas such as English Language, Mathematics, Science and Technology and Health and Family Life and a skill area.

## **The National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J)**

In recent years, Jamaica has made concerted efforts to ensure that all Jamaicans irrespective of their socioeconomic background have equal access to affordable and quality education and training opportunities (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022). This is in keeping with the SDG 4.3 which aims to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. Additionally, the country's Vision 2030 - *Jamaica National Development Plan* - envisions a "Well resourced, internationally recognized, values-based system that develops critical thinking, life-long learners who are productive and successful and effectively contribute to an improved quality of life at the personal, national and global levels" (Government of Jamaica, 2009). The focus of this vision is on facilitating equality of opportunities, social cohesion and partnerships. The establishment of the NQF-J plays a critical role in achieving this vision.

The NQF-J was launched by the *Jamaican Tertiary Education Commission (J-TEC)*, the body that has been charged with responsibility for operationalizing, managing, coordinating, developing and maintaining the framework.

Acknowledging that different types of learning did not enjoy parity of esteem and that many qualifications were not linked to learning pathways, the framework is intended to:

provide recognition and credit for all learning of knowledge and skills and to provide the basis for evaluating and positioning various types of qualifications across the spectrum of the education and training system (PIOJ, 2009).

The establishment of the NQF-J is important to this paper because of its acknowledgement of *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)*. At the root of *PLAR* is the acknowledgment that learning takes place in a wide variety of contexts other than through formal settings and that such learning is often not formally recognised in terms of qualifications or learning credit. From an adult education perspective, the argument is that there should be mechanisms to assess and recognise such learning to enable individuals to access further education, to compete for jobs or gain recognized certification and to achieve their life goals. The J-TEC defines *PLAR* as

the process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of the learning through formal and informal study. The process recognises and gives credit for knowledge, skills, and competencies that have been acquired experientially, that is, through work experience, unrecognized education or training, self-study, volunteer activities, and hobbies (J-TEC, 2023).

The inclusion of *PLAR* within the *NQF-J* is a major step in supporting continuous education and capacity development for all citizens including youth and adults which in the absence of a lifelong learning policy is very important. Additionally, the *NQF-J* has given rise to conversation and initiatives towards the inclusion of micro credentials and broadening access to education and training through flexible learning pathways.

Within the current context, the Jamaican Council for Adult Education continues to be an active voice for the education and training of youth and adults under its renewed mission to promote the education of youth and adults as a human right that is central to individual and national development.

## **Conclusion**

Whereas the beneficiaries of government interventions reaped personal benefit it was evident that adult education provision over the past 50 years has had a



strong economic agenda in which education is seen as a capital good and relates to the economist's concept of human capital. This contribution of education and training to the overall economic development and growth of a country and to an individual's economic future has long been recognized by human capital theorist such as Gary Becker (1975) and Theodore Schultz (1961) who argued that education and training were investments that could add to productivity. From this perspective, the education and training of youths and adults in Jamaica has been treated as a capital good that is helpful in developing the human resource that is needed to support economic and social transformation. The concept of human capital emphasizes the development of skills as an important factor in production activities (Olaniyan, & Okemakinde, 2008). Therefore, as argued by Akinyemi and Abiddin (2013), the practice of youth and adult education in Jamaica over the past 50 years through literacy training, adult basic education, skills training, workforce education, and human resource development was geared towards developing the skills and competencies to enable the expansion of productivity, efficiency, performance and output.

This focus on the economic benefits of adult education within the Jamaican context can be viewed from the perspective of the government's effort to make the country competitive within the global space and to address the situation of low economic growth. This is Adult Education responding to the needs of its contemporary and historical context in which the colonial past in no way prepared the population or the national economy for an independent existence.

Mwalimu throughout behaved with integrity and commitment to the development and welfare of Tanzanians and the sovereignty of Tanzania and the African continent. Adult educators can learn from the struggles that emerged to put transformative education and participatory democracy into practice. For example, participatory methods and philosophy of learning, organizing and action research have been developed within the animation conceptual framework, often called [participatory action research](#). Several activist organizations in Tanzania have adopted animation as the way they organize themselves, and also how they facilitate dialogue, advocacy and participatory action among the communities in which they work. How prepared are they/we to put into practice Nyerere's call for liberating adult education in solidarity with the people?

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## **The Changing Landscape of Adult Learning and Education in Jamaica: Fifty Years and Beyond**

Shermaine Barrett

### **Abstract**

Grounded in the idea that education is a crucial investment, and an engine for growth, Jamaica has sought to transform its economic system from an agrarian dependent to an industrialized system, through the education of its population, including its adults, and in ensuring the human resource needed to assure its development goals and economic advancement. This paper outlines some of these initiatives including, literacy programmes, skills training, the high school diploma equivalency programme and the establishment of the national qualification framework, and examines the changes in the Jamaican context that informed these initiatives over the last 50 years. In commemoration of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary the paper also speaks to the influence of the Council within the Jamaican landscape.

### **Key words**

Adult Learning and Education, Jamaica, economic development

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## **Le paysage changeant de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes en Jamaïque : Cinquante ans et au-delà**

Shermaine Barrett

### **Résumé**

Fondée sur l'idée que l'éducation est un investissement crucial et un moteur de croissance, la Jamaïque a cherché à transformer son système économique d'un système agricole dépendant à un système industrialisé, par l'éducation de sa population, y compris de ses adultes, et en assurant les ressources humaines nécessaires pour assurer ses objectifs de développement et son avancement économique. Cet article présente certaines de ces initiatives, notamment les programmes d'alphabétisation, la formation

professionnelle, le programme d'équivalence du diplôme d'études secondaires et la mise en place du cadre national de qualification, et examine les changements intervenus dans le contexte jamaïcain qui ont influencé ces initiatives au cours des 50 dernières années. À l'occasion du 50e anniversaire du Conseil international d'éducation des adultes (CIEA), l'article évoque également l'influence du Conseil dans le paysage jamaïcain.

#### **Mots clés**

Apprentissage et éducation des adultes, Jamaïque, développement économique.

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### **El cambiante panorama del aprendizaje y la educación de adultos en Jamaica: Cincuenta años y más**

Shermaine Barrett

#### **Resumen**

Partiendo de la idea de que la educación es una inversión crucial y un motor para el crecimiento, Jamaica ha tratado de transformar su sistema económico de un sistema dependiente de la agricultura a un sistema industrializado, mediante la educación de su población, incluidos sus adultos, y garantizando los recursos humanos necesarios para asegurar sus objetivos de desarrollo y su avance económico. En este documento se esbozan algunas de estas iniciativas, como los programas de alfabetización, la formación profesional, el programa de equivalencia del diploma de enseñanza secundaria y el establecimiento del marco nacional de cualificaciones, y se examinan los cambios en el contexto jamaicano que sirvieron de base a estas iniciativas en los últimos 50 años. En conmemoración del 50 aniversario del Consejo Internacional para la Educación de Adultos (ICAE), el documento también habla de la influencia del Consejo en el panorama jamaicano.

#### **Palabras clave**

Aprendizaje y educación de adultos, Jamaica, desarrollo económico.