



JAMAICA

Tracing good and emerging practices on the
right to higher education around the world

Policy initiatives on the right to higher education in Jamaica

Jamaica's ambition is to increase the percentage of its population that has access to and completes higher education to a range of between 50 and 70% by 2030. However, the country continues to struggle to meet this goal: the gross enrolment ratio has decreased to just under 30% and one of the main challenges is the persistent inequity in access to quality secondary level education that prepares graduates to access further education and training, including higher education. Another challenge is lack of access to funding for higher education. Against this backdrop, the government's plan to address the primary barriers to accessing higher education includes developing alternative pathways into higher education, which is directly linked to the development of the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J) and the related Flexible Pathways policy. Parallel to this, the government's Tertiary Students Assistance Programme (TSAP) has been increasing higher education financing (via scholarships and grants) to eligible students. Through these policies, the country seeks to provide an education system, including higher education, that is equitable and accessible by all Jamaicans.

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About the project

The Right to Higher Education



The Right to Higher Education project recognizes that this issue is an imperative of social justice, based on equal opportunities and human rights. It views groups that are marginalised or limited by existing structures as deserving of equity and inclusion in higher education. It is about respecting not only access but also the diversity and democratisation of higher education. The right to higher education is an integral component of the evolving right to lifelong education. This means that higher education is both a public good and a common good. As a public good, higher education should be available to all and access to it should not be impeded. The right to higher education incorporates access to higher education, participation and student success, as well as the post-study trajectories of those who have completed higher education. As the only United Nations institute for higher education, UNESCO IESALC considers it vital that the discussion about the right to higher education be placed on the international agenda to generate a change in public policies and in the existing regulatory framework.

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Policy initiatives on the right to higher education in Jamaica

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
National context	5
Status of the right to higher education.....	7
Right to higher education policies.....	8
Tertiary Students Assistance Programme (TSAP)	8
Rationale	8
Characteristics and implementation.....	9
Scholarships	9
Grants	9
Eligibility for Scholarships and Grants	10
Number of Benefits	10
Assessing Financial Need for Grant Applicants	10
Maintaining the Award	10
Impact	11
Challenges	11
National Qualification Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J).....	12
Rationale	12
Characteristics and implementation	12
Impact	14
Challenges	14
Key findings and recommendations	14
References.....	16

Introduction

Jamaica's ambition is to increase the percentage of its population that has access to and completes higher education to a range of between 50 and 70% by 2030 (Government of Jamaica, 2019). However, the country continues to struggle to meet this goal: the gross enrolment ratio (GER) has decreased from 33% in 2015 (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2022) to today's 29.4% (Planning Institute of Jamaica Economic and Social Survey 2021). In recent years, the country has made concerted efforts to ensure that all Jamaicans, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, have equal access to affordable, quality education and training opportunities (PIOJ, 2022). However, there continue to be challenges, one of the main ones being the persistent inequity in access to quality secondary level education that prepares graduates to access further education and training, including higher education. This is coupled with the serious problem of a lack of access for many to private funding to pursue studies in higher education institutions (HEIs).

The government of Jamaica promulgated the Vision 2030 National Development Plan¹ in 2009. In recognition of the central importance of an educated citizenry to its development agenda, the document identifies as one of its outcomes a world-class education and training system (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2010). It further articulates a national strategy of ensuring adequate, high-quality tertiary education (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2018). However, subsequent assessment shows that the country has fallen short of critical targets regarding participation and the extent and quality of certification. There is also evidence of inequities in access and outcomes associated with socio-economic status, locale, gender, and differences in abilities.

Against this backdrop, the government's plan to address the primary barriers to accessing higher education includes developing alternative pathways into higher education, which is directly linked to the development of the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J) and the related Flexible Pathways policy. Parallel to this, the government's Tertiary Students Assistance Programme (TSAP) has been increasing higher education financing (via scholarships and grants) to eligible students. A comprehensive exploration of these policies, including their characteristics, implementation, impacts and challenges, will be discussed in this case study.

National Context

Jamaica's colonial past and its persistent influence on society following independence in 1962 has framed the culture, context, organisation and scope of its education system, including higher education (Robinson, Stoddart & Alfred, 2013). Its education system and its administration practices were formatted on the British education system. Consequently, just as higher education in Britain was historically overshadowed by inequalities (Blackburn & Jarman, 1993; Egerton & Halsey, 1993; Halsey, 1993) so too in Jamaica. Higher education in Jamaica has traditionally been socially biased, favouring students from the higher socio-economic groups and elite members of society (Jules, 2010; Williams, 1968). Only a small, privileged group was able to afford tertiary education.

The great majority of the country's children have access to primary and secondary schooling, but most of them end primary school illiterate and innumerate and eventually drop out of secondary school, not being able to matriculate to institutions of higher learning (Patterson, 2022).

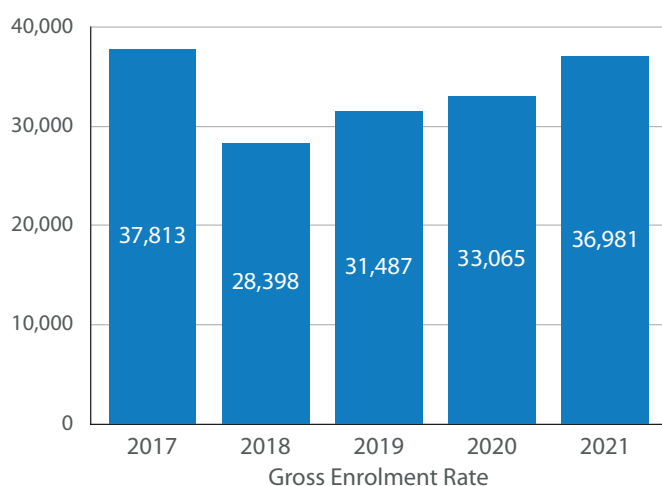
In Jamaica, the end of secondary level education is usually marked by the completion of the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC) examinations, which form the minimum requirement for matriculation into post-secondary and tertiary level education. However, majority of the students continue to fall below the mark. Against this background the island's tertiary rate of enrolment stands at 29.4% well below that of countries at its level of development (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2021).

Based on the most recent data available, figure 1 shows that there has been a marginal yet steady increase in the numbers of students accessing higher education, possibly the result of an increased number of providers in the system. As of 2021 there were 36,981 students in the tertiary level (UNESCO Institute for Statistics data, 2021). This figure is approximately 9% above the gross enrolment number in 2020.

According to the Ministry of Education and Youth (MoEY) approximately 150 public and private higher education institutions currently operate in Jamaica, of which 26 are publicly funded. This is more than a 200% increase from the 45 registered higher education institutions reported by the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ) in 2019. Among the publicly funded institutions are three universities, five

¹ <https://www.vision2030.gov.jm/>

Figure 1 Tertiary Gross Enrolment in Tertiary Education (Bachelor's degree or equivalent/ISCED 6), all students



community colleges, one university college, six teachers' colleges, five multidisciplinary colleges, two polytechnic colleges and four workforce institutions (MoEY, 2023).

Other post-secondary institutions in Jamaica include specialty colleges, technical vocational institutions and overseas institutions, including both those with satellite campuses in Jamaica and online programmes. All these institutions offer a wide variety of programmes from certificates and diplomas to bachelor's degrees to post-graduate degrees (masters and doctoral degrees).

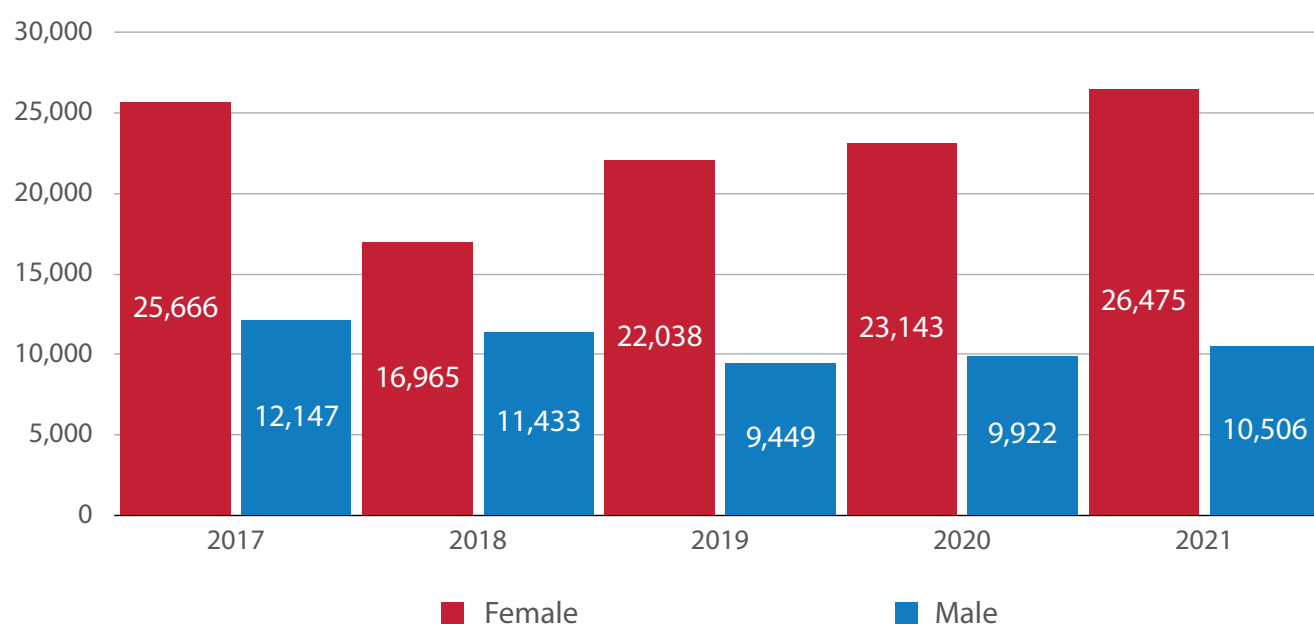
In regard to gender, Jamaica's experience is similar to that of the rest of the world where there are more women in HEIs than men. With a population of 2.8 million, Jamaica ranks

second on the Global Gender Gap Index: some 40 percent of its women go into tertiary education institutions (World Economic Forum). The gender disparity widens at each level of the system. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data (2021), 72% of students enrolled in a Bachelor's degree are females, and only 28% are males (see figure 2). Women also graduate from this level at three times the rate of men (Patterson, 2022).

The MoEY set the policy framework, and implements and supports programmes and initiatives to improve the quality of education within the country. Specific to higher education, the Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission (J-TEC), which is an arm of the MoEY, is mandated to ensure the effective operation of the higher education sector through the implementation of established standards and provision of institutional support (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 2021).

The UCJ was established by an Act of Parliament in 1987 as the national quality assurance body for tertiary education, to ensure quality through the adoption and improvement of educational standards. The UCJ is a statutory body currently under the portfolio of the Minister of Education and Youth (University Council of Jamaica, 2023). The UCJ functions as an accrediting and academic development body for programmes developed at approved tertiary institutions. Quality assurance standards are a requirement of all providers of education in Jamaica, including higher education providers. In this regard, all higher education providers must register with the UCJ and are required to have their programme offerings accredited.

Figure 2 Enrolment in Tertiary Education (Bachelor's degree or equivalent/ISCED 6) in Jamaica between 2017 and 2021, Females and Males



The Council of Community Colleges of Jamaica (CCCJ) is a statutory agency under the MoEY, formed by an Act of Parliament passed in December 2001, to supervise and coordinate the work of community colleges in Jamaica. The CCCJ seeks to determine and implement common standards in all colleges to ensure the integrity of courses from one campus to the next, while aiming to articulate with other educational institutions, both locally and abroad (CCCJ, 2023)

A major challenge in the Jamaican higher education system is the absence of an overarching law governing the higher education sector to establish the relevant authorities and their roles, as well as a clear articulation of the government's responsibilities with regards to programme funding (Patterson, 2022). Consequently, there is limited strategic oversight of the tertiary sector in Jamaica as the focus of the current Education Act focuses largely on guidelines for governing primary and secondary institutions. However, the government recognizes that in order to meet the country's Vision 2030 goals and the MoEY's mandate that all Jamaicans achieve their full potential, higher education must play a critical role in ensuring the human resource needs for the country's development. Therefore, by way of Cabinet Decision No.15/21 dated 29 March 2021, approval was given for the development of a National Higher Education Policy. At the time of writing, a draft policy has been developed and consultations are being held.

Status of the right to higher education

Whereas access to higher education is open to all students who have successfully completed secondary level education, it is not free, and for many there are a variety of barriers including lack of qualifications and lack of access to funding. Even as the government seeks to increase access to and enrolment in higher education, there are two main obstacles from a social justice perspective that limit the participation and presence of students in higher education in Jamaica. The first is the structural inequality that is engrained in the Jamaican education system, arising from the country's colonial past, which has traditionally favoured an elitist approach to education. This approach created what one may call a hierarchy of institutions (Tight, 2019) in which students from higher socio-economic groups are placed in "traditional high schools" that are well resourced (teachers, equipment, infrastructure, the curriculum) and where students are better prepared to meet the matriculation requirements and academic rigour of higher education (Coats, n.d.). At the other

end of the hierarchy, students are placed in under-funded, under-resourced secondary level educational institutions, and the teaching and learning environment does not support all students equitably. In the latter situation, many students are disadvantaged, leaving them ill prepared to advance to institutions of higher learning or even for the world of work (Patterson, 2022).

The second obstacle is lack of finance. Many Jamaican students, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, do not have the resources to cover the costs of higher education. From as far back as the 1980s, the government of Jamaica implemented an access or user charge in which students at the tertiary level were required to contribute towards the tuition cost of education (Planning Institute of Jamaica, 1986), effectively reversing the free education policy for the tertiary level implemented in the 1970s and leading to the establishment of a cost-sharing system which is now a feature of public institutions in Jamaica. This system is considered a source of elitism in higher education in Jamaica: those from the lower socio-income groups are less likely to be able to pay to participate (Barrett-Adams & Hayle, 2021).

The main route to accessing higher education in Jamaica continues to be via the completion of secondary level education. However, the country has embraced the notion of flexible learning pathways with the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), one of the policies examined in this case study.

A key mechanism used by a number of institutions that is also strategically linked to the NQF is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) through which mature students are able to matriculate into courses of study and/or obtain exemptions from various courses. PLAR allows individuals to have assessed, identify, document and gain recognition for their prior learning - formal, informal, non-formal or experiential (JTEC, 2023).

A more recent development in Jamaica is the definition of micro-credential standards, which can provide access to higher education through stackable certification. With micro-credentials being short-term, cost-effective, stackable and flexible, they can provide more options and pathways to accommodate persons who would otherwise be unable to access a long-term education programme. Included in prior learning are those micro-credentials that are recognised, verified and certified.

The University of the West Indies, a regional university system serving the Caribbean, has established what it calls the UWI Open Campus. This decentralized branch of the UWI offers a variety of programmes and courses through online and distance learning, making higher education more accessible to individuals across the Caribbean and beyond.

Other institutions like the University of Technology, Jamaica offers hybrid programmes via a mix of face to face and online modalities, making them more accessible to local and overseas students, particularly for those who work. This has become more popular since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Right to Higher Education Policies

The Jamaican government has initiated some interventions over the last few years to enhance the right to higher education. This case study discusses two policies and related strategies implemented by the government to help students overcome the obstacles related to structural inequality at the secondary level and the lack of finances to enable them to access higher education.

Tertiary Students Assistance Programme (TSAP)

Rationale

According to the Education Transformation Report (2021) one issue precluding access to tertiary education in Jamaica is a lack of private funding to pursue tertiary studies (Patterson, 2022). A 2019 study of the cost of a tertiary education also showed that non-tuition expenses such as travel, meals and housing (whether on or off campus) were a significant part of the costs faced by students and comprised one of the reasons for students dropping out of programmes (Patterson, 2022). Considering tuition, books, supplies, tutoring, cost of living and activities, a study commissioned by J-TEC (2017) found that the cost of pursuing a first-degree programme in Jamaica ranges from a low of J\$ 1,520,287 (US\$ 10,000²) to a high of J\$ 5,796,698 (US\$ 37,400). These figures vary based on programme of study and choice of institution. According to the World Salaries website, the average salary in Jamaica as of 2023 is J\$ 1,157,300 (US\$ 7,500) per annum. This data shows that the lowest-cost programme is above the average income per annum in

Jamaica, highlighting the challenge households face in affording higher education for their children.

The government-run Students' Loan Bureau (SLB) aims to provide affordable financing to students pursuing tertiary education. To date, over 330,000 students have benefitted from the loan scheme (SLB Website). The most recent publicly available SLB annual report (2016/17) reveals that from 2012/13 to 2016/17, a high of 11,699 loans valued at J\$ 3,365bn (US\$ 21.7bn) to a low of 9,492 loans valued at J\$ 3,369bn (US\$ 21.7bn) were disbursed to students.

However, it is a widely known fact that the SLB is not the first choice for students. The Patterson Report (2022) noted that:

there was overwhelming consensus that the SLB was not a preferred option for many students. This has led to students attempting to work full time and study full time and also to the inability of many students to remain in their programmes (p. 52).

Some of the reasons for the unattractiveness of the SLB include the need for guarantors which are difficult to obtain due to the unwillingness of persons to back students who may default, leaving them with a sizeable debt. There is a high level of late or missed payments among borrowers. Another reason given by students has to do with the terms of the loan, including the interest rate and the fact that repayment normally commences approximately six months after scheduled graduation, even though there is no guarantee of employment. After that window of time, many graduates may still not have found a job, turning their unpaid education debt into a source of stress. The Bureau implemented a Reducing Balance Method (RBM) of interest in 2016 and reports that the change from the "add on" method to RBM³ was a major milestone for the SLB and was widely applauded by stakeholders, particularly borrowers who maintain their accounts on a current basis and stand to benefit from a reduction in interest and lower monthly payments. The more manageable monthly payments should ultimately result in an increase in the rate of repayment in the future.

Given the challenges with the SLB and in diversifying sources for student funding, the government of Jamaica has provided funding assistance to needy students for many years. However, it was only in 2019 that a policy framework was promulgated, providing guidelines for the administration of

² All conversions from Jamaican dollars (J\$) to US dollars (US\$) are approximate and provided for comparative purposes only.

³ Capital injections from the Special Education Tax provided the necessary strengthening of SLB's capital base which facilitated the change in interest methodology from an 'add on' method to Reducing Balance Method.

Table 1 – Main characteristics of the right to higher education policies included in Jamaica

	Tertiary Students Assistance Programme (TSAP)	National Qualification Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J) Supporting Alternative Pathways to Higher Education
Created	2019	2017
Type of HEI	Ministry of Education and Youth (MoEY)	Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission (J-TEC)
Benefit	A suite of funding options available to Jamaican students pursuing tertiary programmes of study. Eligible students may benefit from scholarships, grants and work/study programmes.	Allows for equivalences between different types of education (academic, technical and prior learning) to bring equity and respect to all forms of learning and enabling multiple points of entry into higher education.
Reserved vacancies for people with disabilities, Indigenous, Black and mixed-race people in the same proportions of citizens in their respective state	N/A	N/A

all components of the TSAP available through the MoEY which is another source of funding for students.

Characteristics and Implementation

TSAP offers a suite of funding options from MoEY and is available to Jamaican students pursuing tertiary programmes of study. One main aim of these efforts is to increase access, particularly for the most vulnerable students; to higher education programmes which are critical to driving the growth agenda of the Government of Jamaica (MoEY, 2019). According to the policy document, eligible students may access support to fund their higher education programmes through one of three avenues available under TSAP: scholarships, grants or a work/study programme called JAMVAT.

Scholarships

The MoEY advertises available scholarships annually, whereby the terms of each scholarship are detailed. Scholarships are awarded usually on merit to specific programmes for which a need has been identified in the workforce. Students give back through bonds⁴ served within the local work force. Scholarships may also be made available to persons employed by the central Ministry or its Regional Offices, or to teachers employed by government-funded schools who need professional training (MoEY, 2019).

The value of scholarships will vary across individual programmes, with up to 100% of tuition covered along with other benefits which may include funding for on-campus boarding, an annual book grant and an optional maintenance grant for particularly vulnerable students. The list of available awards is published annually at the start of each fiscal year. (MoEY, 2019).

Grants

The MoEY makes a pool of funds available from its annual budget to support vulnerable students who are unable to fully or partially pay tuition. Unlike merit-based scholarships, grants are financial payments which are awarded on the basis of need. Students are required to give back through community service hours. According to the Programme of Advancement Through Health and Education (PATH), vulnerability is assessed based on the household's living conditions as well as socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as age, educational level, type of dwelling, ownership of consumer durables and access to basic social amenities (MoEY, 2019).

A student may benefit from more than one award, but the total benefit to be given to a student cannot exceed J\$ 300,000 (US\$ 1,900) in value for any given academic year. Once a student's total benefit reaches J\$ 300,000, any further funding the student is to receive must be via a scholarship,

⁴ A bond is a legal agreement between the scholarship provider (in this case the government of Jamaica) and the recipient. It requires the recipient to work for a specified period of time in their particular field or industry after completing their course of study. The length of the bond is determined by the total value of the award as outlined in the Bonding Policy of the Ministry of Finance and the Public Sector. Failure to fulfill the terms of the bond may result in the recipient having to pay back the scholarship or face legal consequences.

whereby the terms and requirements of scholarship awards will apply (MoEY, 2019).

Eligibility for Scholarships and Grants

According to a 2019 MoEY policy document, to be eligible for a MoEY tertiary scholarship or grant, an applicant must be:

- a Jamaican national who has resided in Jamaica continuously for no less than three consecutive years prior to the commencement of the programme of study. Students must therefore have been born in Jamaica or were born overseas to Jamaican parent(s) or have been naturalized. Students living in Jamaica holding a student visa are not eligible.
- a registered full-time student that must be enrolled in a face-to-face teaching programme of not less than 450 contact hours per year or a minimum of 30 credit points per year (one credit point is equivalent to 15 contact hours).
- registered in a locally accredited (UCJ) tertiary programme at the associate, diploma or undergraduate degree level.
- aged 30 years or below, except in instances where scholarships make allowances for older students, or where the award is being made in line with an upskilling or upgrading of qualifications.
- able to declare that he/she is not benefitting from any other government-funded student financial assistance programme (except in the case of PATH beneficiaries and Wards of the State).

Scholarship applicants must satisfy all special conditions applicable to the stated award. They are required to sign a bond and be bonded to the Government of Jamaica according to the terms of the individual award. The length of the bond is determined by the total value of the award as outlined in the Bonding Policy of the Ministry of Finance and the Public Service. Students applying for scholarships who are already registered in a study programme must have a minimum grade point average (GPA) of 3.0 (on a 4-point scale) for the courses completed at the time of application in order to be considered for an award. Students applying for grants must have a minimum GPA of 2.2 to be considered for funding (MoEY, 2019).

JAMVAT

The Jamaica Values and Attitudes Programme (JAMVAT) for tertiary students is an initiative whereby students participate in the development of the nation's social capital through their contribution of 200 hours of public service. In return, the government pays 30% of the student's tuition, which should not exceed J\$ 350,000 (US\$ 2,300) in any one academic year (MoEY, 2019).

Students must be able to demonstrate that they have a financial need to qualify for the JAMVAT programme. Students must also be able to prove to the review panel that they are able to pay the portion of the tuition that the grant will not cover (MoEY, 2019).

Number of Benefits

Beneficiaries of any tertiary student award may not access more than one benefit to complete any given course of study. In this regard a student cannot access a scholarship and a grant or obtain a scholarship and then access paid leave⁵ to complete the course of study. Any review of this policy will require approval from 90% of the committee members appointed to review and approve applications (MoEY, 2019).

Assessing Financial Need for Grant Applicants

The interviewing panel and Financial Assistance for Tertiary Education (FATE) Committee are responsible for assessing the financial need of students applying for grants. The level of assistance to be provided is to be determined by conducting a means test while also considering family income and assets. The Adjusted Family Income (AFI) is also to be calculated (MoEY, 2019).

Maintaining the Award

Students benefitting from funding under the MoEY TSAP must satisfy particular requirements in order to maintain their scholarship awards, benefit from multiple grants across different programmes of study, or access to the JAMVAT programme (MoEY, 2019).

Students receiving scholarships will be required to: maintain a 3.0 GPA, sign a bond with the Government of Jamaica, complete 45 hours of community service over the life of their programme of study. Scholarship students whose grade point average (GPA)

⁵ Scholarships may also be made available to persons employed to the central Ministry or its Regional Offices or teachers employed to government funded schools who need to upgrade their qualifications.

falls between 2.9 and 2.2 may be placed on probation for one semester. Failure to improve their performance may result in the award being revoked. Scholarship beneficiaries whose GPA falls below 2.2 will have their award revoked with immediate effect, but those who can provide documentary evidence of a personal or medical crisis, which would have affected their academic performance or school attendance (death in the family, personal illness, etc.), may appeal to the FATE Committee within two weeks of receiving the revocation notice for a review of their case (MoEY, 2019).

Community service is an important feature of the government's Tertiary Students Assistance Programme: all beneficiaries of grants and/or scholarships are required to provide it to give back to the country. Under this initiative, beneficiaries of grants valued at J\$ 150,000 to J\$ 250,000 in total are required to serve 100 hours of community service. Meanwhile, those receiving J\$ 100,000 to J\$ 150,000 are required to serve 70 hours of community service and those that receive less than J\$ 100,000 or bonded scholarship recipients shall serve 40 hours of community service. Community service can be completed in children's homes, hospitals, churches and other service organizations that provide assistance for a community or persons in need. Students may also be required to do their community service in programmes or initiatives developed and being implemented by the MoEY or any other government ministry or agency (MoEY, 2019).

The Tertiary Unit in the MoEY is responsible for the operational activities relating to all components of the TSAP. However, the FATE Committee is responsible for providing oversight for the management of all components of the programme. The FATE Committee is also responsible for annually reviewing approved limits for all grants and making recommendations for increases as deemed necessary to the Permanent Secretary within the MoEY for final approval (MoEY, 2019).

Impact

More than J\$ 523mn (US\$ 3.4mn) was spent on TSAP initiatives during the 2022/2023 fiscal year, when 158 students were awarded scholarships, 997 benefitted from JAMVAT and 1,149 students received grants ranging in value from J\$ 100,000 (US\$ 650) to J\$ 300,000 (US\$ 2,000), bringing total beneficiaries to 2,304. This directly impacted the lower quintile of society by increasing access for this vulnerable group.

The Ministry has provided scholarships for 1,411 students since the inception of the scholarship programme, including 718 who pursued programmes in secondary mathematics

education and 229 in chemistry and physics education. A total of 824 beneficiaries, including 790 teachers, have completed their programme of study and are currently serving their bond – (Minister of Education Sectoral Presentation, 2023). The limited amount of data that is currently available precludes a more detailed analysis of the impact of this programme.

Challenges

The challenges with the Tertiary Student Assistance Programme were described in an interview conducted with the MoEY for this study. They fall into two main categories: those related to the recipients and those in the programme administration. MoEY personnel consider that funding recipients tend to have what Jamaicans refer to as a "freeness" mentality. Many Jamaicans, particularly from the lower economic levels of the society, believe that scholarship should be awarded with no ties. Scholarship students do not want to be bonded as currently required. Parents also discourage their children from accepting scholarships where they will be bonded, as they do not want the students to be prevented from moving overseas for work once they have completed their studies.

The MoEY, however, insists on the requirement for recipients to be bonded. This has led to a low uptake of student scholarships. However, one adjustment made in the 2022/23 academic year is that students are not restricted to work solely with government entities during their bond period. Depending on their area of study, they may be allowed to work in the private sector.

Additionally, the Planning Institute of Jamaica (2022) noted that:

while there has been an increase in the number of scholarships being offered to pursue tertiary studies, the utilisation and access to these scholarships are limited because many students are not aware of them. There is a need to both raise awareness and increase the provision of scholarships and/or tuition support for students from low-income households (p.113).

MoEY officials have also noted challenges with the timely receipt of applications. In response, the Ministry has established an online application process to make it more accessible and to improve the response time. However, students often complain that they were unaware of the assistance programme, only learning of the programme near the deadline to apply. This would suggest that more needs to be done to advertise the programme.

Another challenge identified by the MoEY is the failure of recipients to communicate with the Ministry regarding obstacles they may encounter during their period of studies. This results in recipients having challenges progressing through their programme of study, with some even having their awards discontinued. There is no available data regarding the number of students facing challenges in study progression. Further, some scholarship recipients are having a difficult time reaching the required minimum GPA of 3.0. In one institution the internal administrators sought to address this issue by setting up student peer groups where high-performing students were able to work with other students to improve their grades. This has reportedly resulted positively, with scholarship students being removed from academic probation status.

Another challenge highlighted by the Ministry of Education, which has administrative responsibility for the programme implementation, is with the management of the bond. The ministry reports that it is a challenge to track the students' academic progress and performance, as well as their community work hours. At the time of writing, it was not yet clear what is being done to address this issue, but the matter was under discussion.

National Qualification Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J)

Rationale

The normal entry requirements for tertiary education in Jamaica are five Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) passes including Mathematics and English Language (Barrett Adams & Hayle, 2021). A major exception to this norm is the requirements for entry to the University of the West Indies (UWI), which, given its alignment to the British system requires six Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) passes, a replacement of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) A-levels.

Given the inequitable school education system that ill equips a majority of the nation's students with the necessary skills for higher education, only one third of the secondary cohort qualify for entry into higher education. For example, in 2021, 27,786 students sat the CSEC exams (58% females and 42% males), of which only 39% passed five or more subjects including English and/or Mathematics. Overall, only 23% passed five or more subjects with English and Mathematics.

This suggests that on exiting the secondary level at the end of grade 11, those students would need to engage in other forms of post-secondary or pre-university education activities such as skills training or second chance education programmes or find work. A by-product of this situation is a very large cohort of what is termed "unattached youth" (Lindo & McArdle, 2008) who are not engaged in either schooling or work. It is therefore critical that the government develop strategies to address this problem as it seeks to ensure that all Jamaicans reach their full potential and that adequate, high-quality tertiary education is provided (PIOJ, 2018).

A policy that recognises and validates the various qualifications gained by learners and facilitates transferability is germane to the government's response to this context. In this regard the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J) is critical as it provides the anchor for the government's efforts to address the effects of the inequitable basic education system in the country.

Characteristics and Implementation

The National Qualifications Framework was launched in 2017 by the Jamaican Tertiary Education Commission (J-TEC), which is charged with responsibility for operationalisation, administrative management, coordination, development and maintenance of the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica through its International Relations and Qualifications Division (IRQD) (J-TEC, n.d.).

Within the Jamaican context, the NQF is more than an instrument used to classify a country's qualifications at different levels. It is the main instrument for enabling and facilitating flexible learning pathways (FLP) in higher education in Jamaica. The framework outlines all types and levels of higher education programme offerings in Jamaica. The establishment of a National Qualifications Framework is one of the factors identified in the Vision 2030 as necessary in building a world-class Jamaican education and training system, as outlined by the Planning Institute of Jamaica:

It is intended to provide recognition and credit for all learning of knowledge and skills and will provide the basis for evaluating and positioning various types of qualifications across the spectrum of the education and training system (PIOJ, 2009).⁶

⁶ Though the NQF-J was identified in the Vision 2030 as necessary in building a world-class Jamaican education and training system, the process of developing the framework met a number of roadblocks. Consequently, the document was only completed and launched in 2017.

Importantly, the NQF-J demonstrates the multiple pathways including Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) for entering, progressing, transferring and completing higher education and transitioning into the labour market. The framework is intended to facilitate flexibility in pathways to obtaining higher education certification whether within a particular track (academic or vocational) or across tracks (See Figure 1).

The NQF-J is seen as a significant departure from the traditional way of doing higher education in Jamaica and has been described by Barrett-Adams and Hayles (2021) as “the leveller” (p.58). The framework reinforces the notion that advanced-level certification through CSEC and CAPE passes are no longer the sole means by which individuals can access higher education, including university education. The NQF-J supports greater flexibility in the matriculation requirements to access higher education, thus making access to higher education more inclusive.

To operationalise the Qualification Framework, a number of supporting policies have been articulated. These policies and their principal goals include:

The Qualifications Registry of Jamaica Listing: To ensure that qualifications listed on the registry are authentic and contain all prescribed elements. It also serves to guarantee that institutions have the mechanisms, policies and procedures to maintain and develop qualifications offered for listing.

Qualifications Eligibility Criteria and Compliance: To ensure that qualifications placed on the NQF-J comply with requirements and criteria set by the relevant regulatory body, JTEC.

Qualification Assessment and Placement on the NQF-J: To ensure that qualifications placed on the NQF-J are fit for purpose and meet the needs of learners or the labour market.

Supporting Learners with Special Needs: To ensure the provision of equal, suitable opportunities for the integration and access of learners with special needs within the education and training programmes.

Supporting Flexible Learning Pathways: To promote the concept of flexible learning pathways within the qualifications system by enhancing progression pathways between education and training sectors and developing a common understanding of recognition of prior learning within the

Figure 1: National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica

Levels	JAMAICAN TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTORS				
	General Education	Technical & Vocational	Occupational Degrees	Tertiary Education	Lifelong Learning
8		C/NVQ 8	Applied Doctorate	Doctoral Degree	Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR)
7		C/NVQ 7		Masters Degree	
6		C/NVQ 6	Occupational Masters	Post Graduate Certificate / Diploma	
5		C/NVQ 5	Occupational Bachelors	Bachelors Degree	
4		C/NVQ 4	Occupational Associates	Associate Degree / Advanced Diploma	
3	Certificate (Upper Secondary)	C/NVQ 3		Diploma	
2	Certificate (Upper Secondary Leaving)	C/NVQ 2			
1	Certificate (Lower Secondary)	C/NVQ 1			
---	Access Point 2				
	Access Point 1				

Source: Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission, <https://jtec.gov.jm/the-national-qualifications-framework/>

context of the NQF-J; promote the value of flexible learning pathways such as prior learning, as being on equal terms with formal learning; to provide guidance to institutions in developing mechanisms for PLAR in accordance with established regulations.

Continuous Quality Management and Improvement of the NQF-J: To ensure that the structure, typology, values and characteristics of the NQF-J are maintained and benchmarked against international standards.

Supporting Lifelong Learning: To promote the concept of lifelong learning within the qualifications system by enhancing progression pathways between education and training sectors and developing a common understanding of recognition of prior learning within the context of the NQF-J.

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) methodology, which is used to define the implementation of flexible learning pathways, is one of J-TEC's main strategies for operationalising the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQF-J).

Impact

Concerning the development and implementation of the NQF-J, there is no data available at this time in terms of its outcomes and impacts. As Patterson (2022) noted, data is often non-existent in Jamaica's tertiary sector. However, it is generally agreed that the framework is a gamechanger as it relates to increased access to higher education in Jamaica, particularly when it comes to facilitating flexible pathways to higher education including via micro credentials and PLAR. This has been identified as a key outcome of the implementation of the NQF-J.

An interview with JTEC personnel conducted for this study reveal that a number of institutions have developed PLAR policies to guide adult student admittance via this route (e.g., the University of Technology, Jamaica, The HEART Trust NSTA, the Mico University College).

According to JTEC personnel, over 50 HEIs have been sensitized on PLAR and NQF-J; over 400 qualifications have been placed on NQF-J, reflecting equivalencies between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and academic programmes. This facilitates access for TVET students traditionally excluded from academic programmes. Additionally, a draft Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) is now in place. Yet, as with the TSAP, there is a lack of

data on the impact of the NQF-J. The lack of data has been identified as a weakness in the education system in Jamaica, particularly at the tertiary level.

Challenges

The cultural and social impacts of colonisation have been embedded in Jamaica's education sector, resulting in an unjust system. As such, a cultural shift to decolonise the sector and provide access to all is needed for the proper operationalisation of the NQF-J and to establish equity and parity of esteem. This would support greater acceptance of the NQF-J and its promotion of FLPs and PLAR.

Additionally, the lack of clarity of roles in the higher education sector, particularly between JTEC and the UCJ regarding the implementation of programmes, is problematic. However, the soon-to-be-finished Higher Education Policy should help to clarify the roles and functions of the various players in the higher education sector, including JTEC and the UCJ. A related, significant challenge is that JTEC is not yet legally established even though the legislation has been in draft for well over a decade (Patterson, 2022), and the UCJ assumes roles that have not been legally established. This needs to be urgently addressed by the government.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The number of students accessing higher education in Jamaica has continued to increase incrementally over the past three years, suggesting that the government's efforts to increase access is having some positive impact in the higher education sector. The TSAP has enabled hundreds of students, who may have otherwise been unable to do so, to access higher education. However, this number seems small given the government's goal to have between 50 and 70% of the eligible cohort participating in post-secondary education while also expanding access to training, certification and employment.

The recognition and validation of the various levels and types of education, formal and non-formal, would also have a positive impact on the higher education landscape by enabling thousands of students to matriculate into higher-education programmes. This process, facilitated by the NQF-J, is critical as the country seeks to provide an education system, including higher education, that is equitable and accessible

by all Jamaicans. This would also put a major dent in the large number of Jamaica's "unattached youth."

The absence of data to monitor the implementation and progress of these initiatives is also an important finding of this study.

Recommendations

A national campaign is required to change the mindset of stakeholders - particularly students and their parents or guardians - regarding the various funding opportunities under the student assistance programmes. This campaign should particularly address the issue of bonding. Additionally, there should be greater collaboration with schools at the secondary level in the marketing of these grants and scholarships. This should increase student awareness and lead to a greater uptake while also improving the timeliness of the applications.

More needs to be done by the MoEY to support grant and scholarship recipients in maintaining their GPA in order to retain their funding. This may mean greater collaboration between the ministry and the various institutions in which the beneficiaries are studying. The peer-to-peer assistance covered in this study provides an example of the kinds of mechanisms that can assist students.

The MoEY needs to strengthen its administrative capacity to ensure that all aspects of the TSAP are managed efficiently and that student progress through the system is monitored. This would include improving the management of the students while serving their bond. Otherwise, this could lead to frustrations on the part of both the students and the Ministry.

Much more needs to be done to sensitise and facilitate buy-in among HEIs for the utilisation of alternative matriculation modalities, including Prior Learning Assessment.

The government of Jamaica must urgently complete the JTEC-related regulations to give it the powers to enforce the matters under its mandate, including the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica.

The Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission should increase efforts to have more programme qualifications placed on the NQF-J.

There should be a statutory requirement for all institutions to function within the NQF-J, thus institutionalising the

alternative pathways for lateral and vertical movements within the tertiary system (Patterson, 2022).

The government should ensure expeditious ratification of the draft higher education policy, which ought to lead to further clarity in terms of institutional roles and responsibilities. It would also ensure that the system is being run efficiently and that implementation of the NQF-J can be properly managed and monitored.

The MoEY and its various bodies with responsibility for the tertiary sector should be more proactive in ensuring that data is collected on the impact of its various programmes, including those aimed at increasing access to higher education.

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