

UNESCO Press Release August 2020

UNESCO and Blackboard launch initiative to train teachers for online and blended learning skills to support quality education during COVID-19

UNESCO - Blackboard Academy Caribbean Sub-regional Pilot Project 2020

Kingston, August 24th - UNESCO, together with Blackboard, today launched the "Blackboard Academy Caribbean Sub-regional Pilot Project 2020," a workshop designed to provide professional development for teachers in the English and Dutch Caribbean to use blended learning and online strategies competently in distance and online education in the COVID-19 era and beyond.

The aim of this initiative is to train a cohort of 40 master facilitators in the Caribbean sub-region as experts in blended and online learning strategies to train 200 teachers, 10 per country, with the skills to apply innovative online and blended teaching methods or adaptive pedagogies in the new teaching and learning situation in the time of COVID-19. In addition, the initiative strengthens the teachers' ability to respond to the current crisis in the local environment and to strengthen the resilience of the sub-region's education systems to future shocks.

The initiative will leverage Blackboard Academy, a professional development platform for educators. Its portfolio includes courses on Digital Teaching and Learning, Learning Analytics and Product Training. Blackboard Academy courses are examples of best practices in online learning, delivered by experts in digital education.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres' policy brief on education during COVID-19 and beyond warns that the pandemic has caused the most severe disruption to education systems in history. One of the recommendations calls for better support for the teaching profession, the removal of obstacles to connectivity, investment in digital technologies and flexible learning pathways.

In the Caribbean sub-region, nearly 7 million students in 23 countries are affected by the COVID 19 virus. Distance learning has been a challenge during the crisis, with many problems in remote areas, including little or no connectivity, lack of access to online educational assessment tools and the unwillingness of teachers to move from traditional classroom teaching to online environments.

Dr. Faryal Khan, Programme Specialist for Education of the UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean, points out that "in such a context, many students risk falling behind, which further increases inequalities in education. Those who have to take exams of high standards run the risk of being promoted to higher grades, if they are not able to prepare for them adequately. Teachers therefore need to be trained to accompany their students adequately from distance learning and to teach during school closures through COVID-19, whether through online teaching or blended learning."

For this initiative, UNESCO, in cooperation with the regional ministries of education, is selecting the 40 facilitators who will be trained during a 4 week online workshop hosted in Blackboard Academy at K-12, elementary, and secondary levels with strategies for designing the online classroom. Whether teachers plan to use a blended classroom or a fully online one, this course supports them to ease the transition in creating an online class environment that meets the needs of both students and teachers. The course content is not tied to any specific Learning Management System. Participants will be assessed and, if successful, certified by Blackboard in co-operation with its academic partners. In addition, the course will include methods to confront learners online with different learning styles and needs, as an online classroom presents different challenges than a traditional classroom where teachers can oversee lessons and monitor student attention.

Lee Blakemore, Blackboard Chief Client Officer and President Global Markets stated, “It is more important now than at any other time that teachers develop best practices for delivering engaging and sustainable online learning environments. The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how teachers around the world have to connect with students while school buildings remain shuttered. Blackboard Academy is uniquely designed to help teachers get certified in the skills that will be needed today and beyond. We are proud to partner with UNESCO to bring this offering to even more teachers in the Caribbean.”

The topics covered in the workshop will focus on online educational methods, including the use of educational videos and interactive platforms, as well as the use of web conferencing tools such as zooming, online task creation and quizzes, the selection of high quality online educational resources, and also a workshop day on online delivery pedagogy to engage students through online learning.

UNESCO has launched the Global Education Coalition, a multi-stakeholder commitment to protect the right to education and to ensure continuity of learning during the school year. As part of UNESCO's Global Coalition for Education, UNESCO's Caribbean Office in Kingston, which serves 20 small Caribbean island developing States in the English and Dutch Caribbean, has joined forces with regional ministries of education and the private sector to support teachers and students in their efforts to continue learning during the COVID 19 crisis.

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