

Launch of the COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative in Barbados



19 August 2020

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Honourable Colin E Jordan, Minister of Labour and Social Partnership Relations, Senator Toni Moore, Mr Edward Clarke, Dr Karen Best and Ms Moreen Bowen

It is a pleasure to be part of this official launch, even if ‘virtually’. If it wasn’t for COVID-19, we may all have been present in the same room. One of the other casualties of COVID-19 is the economy. The pandemic has highlighted the need for many of our citizens to be skilled and reskilled for livelihoods as a matter of priority. The Ministry of Labour and Social Partnership Relations has taken the lead in responding to our call for joining the COL-Coursera Workforce Recovery Initiative. In partnership with Coursera, COL is committed to supporting 50,000 people around the Commonwealth to prepare for employment or entrepreneurship. Since the learners cannot go to university, the university is coming to the learner, and that, too, free of cost!

As you know, it is a young Commonwealth with 60% of its population under the age of 30. Youth unemployment in the Commonwealth at 17% is already higher than the global average. COVID-19 is expected to further exacerbate youth unemployment especially in developing countries. That is why the Workforce Recovery Initiative is both timely and critical. We are very grateful to the CEO of Coursera, Mr Jeff Maggioncalda and his team for this partnership.

Hon Minister, you’ll be pleased to note that the uptake of this programme has been particularly enthusiastic in the Caribbean. There have been large enrolments from Grenada, followed by Trinidad & Tobago and St Lucia. The reports so far are very encouraging, as participants have been able to find the courses of their interest from over 4,000 courses on offer, taught by top professors from some of the major universities in the world. Your Ministry has already recommended over 2,000 names—let me assure you that we will be happy to accommodate more than twice that number.

Yesterday, we held a virtual convocation for the first 2,300 graduates from 17 countries in Africa. I was really happy to see the glow of confidence on the faces of the graduates. Later in the year, a similar convocation will be held for the Caribbean, when I hope, Hon Minister, you will be able to join us.

In addition to offering these courses, COL is supporting the learners by establishing help desks in each country. This becomes necessary, as there will be many first-time online learners needing help with how to proceed. The aim of these help desks is to provide academic, administrative and counselling support. A similar desk is being made available in Barbados, thanks to the support of your Ministry.

As online and blended learning is the future of education, this initiative provides a great opportunity for our citizens to become self-directed lifelong learners and gain the skills employers are looking for and needed for national development. It will also have an impact on the educational system by forcing it to embrace innovative and alternative approaches.

The Commonwealth of Learning promotes learning for sustainable development through the use of technologies. COL is your organisation and it works for you. Please make full use of our expertise and resources. Dr Karen Best, as former Focal Point is well aware of the support that COL can provide. Hon Minister let me also take this opportunity to thank the Government of Barbados for its continued financial and intellectual support.