

## Opening up access to eLearning experiences: A Caribbean case study

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### Abstract

The goal of this exploratory case study was to improve the quality of a tertiary level course in media and technology education by opening up new learning experiences for students located at two physically distant Caribbean campuses: the University of the West Indies (UWI) Cave Hill Campus in Barbados and the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College (SALCC) in St. Lucia. The study explored co-planned eLearning experiences that provided common activities for both groups of students. Prior to the study, there was no online (or any other) interaction between the students; each course was implemented separately by each lecturer at their respective campus, although students followed a common syllabus. Interaction between lecturers was more administrative than instructional. Participants in the study were the 55 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Education, Media and Technology in Education course, at both campuses, during the second semester of the 2018-2019 academic year. Three common eLearning opportunities were implemented during the course: a blog, and 2 webinars via ZOOM, one by each lecturer. Student feedback via an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the course indicated that they valued the eLearning experiences as they gave them opportunities to interact with students in another Caribbean country. They reported that eLearning provided novel, convenient and efficient access to course resources and helped them learn course content better. However, students were challenged by technical and pedagogical aspects of the eLearning experiences.

Caribbean education, eLearning, cross-border education, access to tertiary education, franchise partnership

### Introduction

The goal of the pilot exploratory case study that is the focus of this paper, was to open up access to new eLearning experiences for students enrolled in a tertiary-level undergraduate course. Although students were enrolled in the same course, they were located at two physically distant Caribbean campuses in Barbados and St. Lucia. For the purpose of this paper, eLearning is synonymous with hybrid or blended learning which includes both online and face-to-face learning (UWI, 2014, 2015).

#### Opening up access to quality education

One of the mandates of any tertiary institution is to protect its sustainability through the economic advantage that increased student enrolment provides. The University of the West Indies (UWI) is no different. However, as a regional institution that serves the English-Speaking Caribbean, the additional responsibility for sustainable development of the Caribbean region also hangs in the balance. The current UWI Strategic Plan (2015)- the UWI Triple A Strategy (2017-2022)- states that “The primary mandate of The University of the West Indies (The UWI) is to serve in the advancement of the Caribbean community and sustain its development” (p. 3). The strategic plan makes it clear that a major route to sustainable development- a major strategic goal-is opening up access to tertiary education: “The UWI needs to facilitate an **access** revolution in higher education in the Caribbean region given the low level of enrolment at the tertiary level regionally” (p. 6). With this goal in mind, a key performance indicator of access is: 65,000 students enrolled in graduate and postgraduate programmes by 2022 (p. 10).

However, access measured by student enrolment should to be juxtaposed against access to “pedagogical quality”- access to educational programmes that provide quality learning opportunities. While policy can open the doors and let the numbers in, it is what is on the other side of those doors that matter to student learning. Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015) seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable *quality* education. Access to tertiary learning should provide students with the powerful ideas and skills that help them contribute to sustainable self-development and the sustainable development of the places they affect- whether locally, regionally or internationally. That is, access to tertiary education should also be access to pedagogical quality. This goal is captured in the UWI’s strategic plan’s Access Objective, AC3: Improving the quality of teaching, learning and student development (UWI Triple A Strategy, 2015, p.7).

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### Opening Up Access to Tertiary Education through Franchising arrangements with partner institutions in the Caribbean

Vincent-Lanerin (2004) described several forms of “cross-border” tertiary education initiatives including selling or franchising a course to a foreign institution in order to build capacity. More than two decades ago, in 1996, the UWI adopted such a model and partnered with various tertiary education institutions (TLIs) in the English-Speaking Caribbean to open up access to UWI degree programmes through a “franchising” agreement between the UWI and the TLIs (Roberts, 1999, 2003). Potential students in the TLIs could obtain a UWI degree without the expense of having to travel from their island home to another island to attend one of the campuses of the UWI. Instead, faculty at the local TLI would implement the franchised UWI degree programme *in situ*. Fast forward to 2019, and the franchised partnerships remain a staple of the UWI’s strategy for opening up access to tertiary education in the region.

### The Case Study

The partnership between the UWI, Cave Hill and its “franchised” TLI partner, the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College provided the context for the exploratory case study described in this paper. Two sections (classes) of the same undergraduate course were taught concurrently at the two campuses with one section at UWI, Cave Hill (CH) and the other section at the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College (SALCC). The study set out to explore opportunities for interaction between the students in the two sections of the course and their respective lecturers.

### Institutional Challenges

Administrative vs Pedagogical Intent. Sife et al (2007) highlight a challenge to ICT integration in tertiary education as the use of ICT to retain traditional practices; integration becomes ICT-driven rather than pedagogy-driven and so fails to transform pedagogical practices. Similarly, while several measures existed to ensure the quality of the administration of the UWI franchised partnerships, little attention had been paid to enhancing the quality of the students’ learning experiences that were made possible because of the partnership. Instead, interaction between lecturers was traditionally more administrative than instructional and although students followed a common syllabus and took a common examination, each course was implemented separately by the lecturer at their respective campus.

Therefore, at the onset, the way in which the learning management system (LMS) at Cave Hill was administered created challenges to interaction between the students and lectures at the two campuses. Traditionally, the CH lecturer was assigned to a course on the LMS and would therefore have online access to all the students enrolled in that course. The CH lecturer therefore had online access to students at both CH and SALCC, who in turn had online access to the CH lecturer. However, the SALCC lecturer, as non-Cave Hill faculty, did not have access to the LMS at Cave Hill. As a result, the CH lecturer had both online and face-to-face access to the CH students in the course but only online access to the SALCC students, while the SALCC lecturer had face-to-face access to the SALCC students but neither online nor face-to-face access to the CH students. Further, the SALCC and CH students were assigned to different eLearning spaces (different Moodle sections of the course). In essence, the learning management system offered administrative support of the course e.g. the entry of students’ grades by the CH lecturer, but limited inter-campus pedagogical support. As a pre-requisite of collaboration across the two campuses, arrangements had to be made for a common, virtual third section of the course in which all students were enrolled (a meta-course). And, both lecturers were assigned (given access) to all three online class sections.

### Study Participants

Participants in the study were the 55 students enrolled in the Bachelors in Education (BEd), Media and Technology in Education course, during the period January to May, 2019. Ten students were enrolled in the course at Cave Hill (CH) while 45 students were enrolled in the course at SALCC.

While all students were enrolled in the same course, there were several differences between the 2 groups. See Table 1 below. Students at SALCC were pursuing the BEd programme while CH students were primarily in the BSc programme and chose the Media and Technology course as an elective. All the SALCC students were pursuing the BEd part-time as they were trained teachers actively practising in primary and secondary schools. On the other hand, all the CH students were full-time students with only one holding teaching qualification- a BSc mathematics degree. There was also an age disparity between the groups: the median age of the CH students was 23 years while that of the SALCC students was 33 years.

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Table 1

*Participants*

	Cave Hill (n=10)	SALCC (n=45)
Enrolled in BEd	0	45 (100%)
Enrolled in BSc	8 (80%)	0
Enrolled in BA	2	0
Teaching Qualification	1 (10%)	45 (100%)
Enrolment status	Full-time	Part-time
Age range	21 to 41	22 to 50
Median Age	23	33

### The Learning Activities

The broad goal of the study was to improve the quality of students' learning experiences in the Media and Technology course. This was explored through three common eLearning opportunities implemented during the course: a blog located on the SALCC eLearning platform, and 2 webinars via ZOOM, delivered by each lecturer with both lecturers in attendance. The blog provided a discussion forum for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning. The first webinar presented information on Copyright Law with emphasis on Fair Use in education and Creative Commons licenses. The second webinar, on digital literacy, was adapted from the Commonwealth of Learning's Digital Leadership curriculum; students were assigned to collaborative groups composed of a mix of students from each of the campuses.

As previously described, in order to facilitate the eLearning activities, two administrative initiatives were taken:

- Provide TLI lecturer with access to the UWI eLearning platform (Moodle) for both TLI and CH students.
- Provide students in both groups with access to a common online space -a Moodle meta-course.

The initiatives described improved the quality of the students' learning experiences as described in Table 2 below.

Table 2

*Enhancing quality of students' learning experiences*

Provide TLI lecturer with access to UWI e-learning platform (Moodle) for both TLI and CH students.	Facilitated common planning for lecturers; increased lecturers' knowledge of each other's implementation of the course
Provide students in both groups with access to a common online space -Moodle meta-course.	Provided on-line space for common student resources e.g. study surveys
Blog on 21 <sup>st</sup> century learning	Provided opportunity for students to experience "flipped learning"- independent learning of new material; Provided CH students with access to learning resource created for SALCC students- exposed CH students to the technical expertise of another lecturer Allowed asynchronous exchange of ideas/understanding between the 2 groups of students.
Webinar on Copyright Law/Fair Use in Education Webinar on Digital Leadership	Provided access to the expertise of both lecturers to all students. Provided synchronous communication opportunity among participants.

### Student feedback

Student feedback was collected via an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire administered at the end of the semester. Each student was asked to sign a consent form that informed them of the purpose of the questionnaire

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and assured them of the confidentiality of their responses and their option to voluntarily withdraw, without penalty. Students who participated in the activity and their response rates are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

*Student response rate*

	Blog 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning	Webinar Copyright	Webinar Digital Literacy
# (%) Participants in the Activity	54 (98%)	50 (91%)	47 (85%)
Response rate to questionnaire	39 (72%)	32 (64%)	28 (60%)

For each activity, students were asked to respond to the same questions:

1. Did the activity add value to the course?
2. How, if in any way, did the activity add value to the content being addressed?
3. Were there any advantages to online delivery?
4. What three changes do you think would make this activity a more valuable learning experience?

All student responses were entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Responses were read, then re-read and coded. Codes were grouped into thematic categories. Questions 2 and 3 were analysed together. A summary of student feedback is given below.

Students were asked to reflect on the extent to which each of the activities “added value” to the course, given a “yes/no” dichotomous choice. See Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Did the activity add value to the course?*

	Blog 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Learning	Webinar Copyright	Webinar Digital Literacy
# (%) Yes	37 (95%)	28 (87.5%)	26 (93%)

Students were asked to respond to the questions: How, if in any way, did the activity add value to the content being addressed? And Were there any advantages to online delivery? Their responses to these questions were analysed by codes then codes were grouped into thematic categories. A sample of the analysis of student responses to the Blog on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning is shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5

*How, if in any way, did the activity add value to the content being addressed?*

*Were there any advantages to online delivery?*

Response	Code	Category/theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The social interaction helped me to understand the content better</li> <li>• Interaction with Cave Hill peers provided clarity in some cases and exposure to new knowledge in others</li> </ul>	eLearning-Student-student interaction- understand content	eLearning allowed social interaction among students that helped them to better understand course content

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It allowed me to view multiple perspectives hence increasing my understanding of the topic</li> <li>• The activity allow me to understand different terms better and to respect the perspective of my colleagues</li> </ul>	eLearning-Student-student interaction- multiple perspective	eLearning allowed social interaction among students exposed them to multiple perspectives on the same issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We were able to respond to the blog in our own time, when we were comfortable with the information.</li> <li>• I could go to the blog anytime to read on content that I had not acquired during instruction. Content was readily available.</li> </ul>	eLearning- more time to understand content	eLearning/blog afforded students a space for deeper thinking about course content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved my awareness on how technology should be used during instruction</li> <li>• It was very student-centred learning with the technology</li> <li>• Allowed me to see how technology can be used in a classroom setting</li> </ul>	eLearning- exemplar	eLearning provided exemplars of technology integration in instruction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not have to travel far on those days</li> <li>• Ability to stay home and participate in sessions</li> <li>• Avoided dreaded commute to class</li> </ul>	eLearning- convenient access	eLearning afforded students more efficient and cost-effective access to learning resources

Across all the eLearning activities, the blog and the 2 webinars, student feedback indicated several advantages, such as those shown in Table 5. Students reported that the content covered was relevant and timely and that the method of delivering the content helped them to learn it better. The most cited advantage of the blog was that it allowed social interaction among students that helped them to better understand course content and appreciate the perspectives of others. For the webinar on copyright law, students reported that the content was valuable, “eye-opening” and made them reflect on their practice. The same was said for the webinar on digital leadership. Two students specifically commented on the small-group interaction in the virtual break out rooms:

*Provisions were made for small group discussions [in virtual break out groups], which made learning fun and interactive, while still being productive. (SALCC student)*

*The webinar on Digital Literacy on April 16th was one of the best experiences of this course. The content covered was relatable, applicable and well covered. The learning activity done [in virtual break out groups] was very authentic and opened up the floor to valuable discussion. Again, this webinar allowed us to show and to sharpen our skills as 21st century learners through [the use of] media. (Cave Hill student)*

### Student challenges to a quality eLearning experience

Feedback on challenges to eLearning was solicited with the question: What three changes do you think would make this activity a more valuable learning experience?

**Technical barrier.** A major issue that delayed the start of the first webinar (copyright law) was that students in SALCC took a long time to get online due to technical difficulties for some and familiarity with the ZOOM platform for others. Students therefore suggested that tutorial sessions should be offered beforehand. However, in many instances, logging onto the webinar was complicated by lack of student access to reliable WiFi at their point of access. While CH students could rely on reliable WiFi on campus and at home, SALCC students did not have campus-wide or country-wide connectivity. In addition, the webinar on Digital Literacy, delivered from St. Kitts and Nevis, was hampered by poor internet quality.

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Social barrier. While students appreciated their interactions with each other, many students reported that they would have preferred getting to know each other better, before meeting in formal online activities.

The CH students reported that the disparity of numbers was sometimes overwhelming and gave more voice to the SALCC students. They suggested smaller webinar groups and more activities that helped them to get to know the SALCC students.

Pedagogical barrier. In general, students suggested making each of the webinar sessions shorter, more interactive, more student-centred. They also suggested that the course be interspersed with more eLearning activities and more opportunities to interact with both lecturers.

### Faculty challenges

Co-planning and co-facilitating a course “across borders” posed a number of administrative and pedagogical challenges. It demanded a lot of planning and implementation time and required constant communication between the lecturers. Due to other work commitments, both lecturers were challenged by lack of availability of common planning time and communication delays that resulted in a failure to follow-through on some activities. A lack of planning time hampered the sophistication and the variety of the learning experiences that were offered to students. In particular, the lecturers should have devoted more time at the beginning of the course to informal activities for student-student interaction so that students could get to know each other better before participation in the formal activities. However, while students were asked to complete their eLearning profiles, the plan to use this information to facilitate online student “ice breakers” and to create small CH-SALCC working groups was never realised. Further, pedagogical quality would have been increased with more collaboration between the two groups of students. Unfortunately, while lecturers discussed a common course project involving collaborative groups with members from each campus, designing and implementing such a project will have to be left to future collaboration.

### Other institutional challenges

Institutional capacity. While the UWI has expressed commitment to eLearning through policy documents (UWI, 2014, 2015) and established a regional office for online learning in 2017, policy alone was not enough to ensure quality teaching and learning. Many factors affect the implementation of eLearning at tertiary institutions (Sife, et al, 2007; Tarus, et al, 2015). Differences in resource capacity of partner institutions- CH and SALCC- led to differences in technical support and maintenance.

Further, other specific technical issues challenged the implementation of eLearning. For example, the CH lecturer used a CH-based ZOOM link that did not allow the lecturer to “host” the copyright webinar. This hampered recording of the webinar as well as control over the way in which participants engaged in the webinar. In addition, more time should have been devoted to addressing deficits in students’ technology skills- students needed to be up to speed with ZOOM before its formal use in the course.

### Implications for tertiary eLearning partnerships in the Caribbean

Vincent-Lancrin (2004) suggested that cross-border models for tertiary education institutions help to meet unmet demands for education and build capacity for the institutions to better offer quality tertiary education. Mulder (2013) further stated that sustainable innovative use of open education resources should meet the triple standards of accessibility, efficiency and quality. It can be argued that the UWI-TLI cross-border model explored in this study can provide a viable, efficient option and an exciting opportunity for building the capacity of the UWI in line with its mandate to build regional capacity through access to quality teaching, learning and student development at the tertiary level across the English-Speaking Caribbean. The cross-campus partnerships already exist; they have become an accepted feature of the tertiary education landscape in the Caribbean. The inter-campus eLearning model explored in this study is one step towards mining the eLearning potential of the franchised partnerships.

However, for the eLearning potential of inter-campus models to be realised, several issues need to be addressed. One challenge is to re-envision the LMS through an eLearning lens. The LMS should provide not only the administrative support that currently exists for courses but should also be reconfigured to facilitate online learning. A second challenge is to recognise inter-campus faculty collaboration/co-teaching as an important opportunity for professional development and the building of inter-faculty collegiality, and therefore to acknowledge and credit faculty with the time spent on such endeavours. A third challenge is to realise the cultural differences that may exist among students from different Caribbean islands and therefore to provide social opportunities for intercultural exchange among students. Finally, institutional disparities in access to the

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internet need to be addressed if students in the same UWI course are to have learning experiences of similar quality.

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