COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING

Open, Inclusive, High-Quality Schooling for All:

A PROPOSITION FOR THE CARIBBEAN

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The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) is an intergovernmental organisation created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to promote the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies.

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The search for a secondary schooling approach that addresses the needs and aspirations of young people, families, the labour market and society at large has been a continuous endeavour for almost all nations but much more so for the post-colonial countries that bear the burden of colonial legacies, including fragmented education systems.

Introduction

Education has always been approached through a variety of lenses, and it needs to address multiple yet diverse needs and concerns. For learners, it is an opportunity to learn and socialise and to access certifications that can lead to further education, training and other opportunities as an adult. For education providers, including institutions, it presents the challenge of how to provide high-quality education that not only creates transformative learning experiences but also responds to diverse individual needs. The emergence of new technology has added critical dimensions to these challenges in terms of both the skillset requirements and its use in the delivery of education for a diverse set of disciplines, locations and learners.

Family and community also play a key role in the success or failure of both individuals and entire education systems. In addition, any education system must take into account issues that are specific to a region and its economy, and these will have changed in recent years due to a number of factors, including technological shifts and the emergence of digital domains.

The search for a secondary schooling approach that addresses the needs and aspirations of young people, families, the labour market and society at large has been a continuous endeavour for almost all nations but much more so for the post-colonial countries that bear the burden of colonial legacies, including fragmented education systems. The Caribbean region is no exception, with its specific geo-political features, such as small, island economies, as well as specific educational challenges. Overall, the region has seen progress in access to education, but it has yet to achieve the goal of universal secondary education (World Bank, n.d.). One specific problem in the region is gender disparity in favour of girls, often referred to as male disengagement from education. A recent study commissioned by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) shows that the gender gap in favour of girls in the Caribbean is significant and indicates a need to systematically address a range of structural, cultural and pedagogical factors in the current overall education system (Kerr-Edwards, 2025).

A number of Caribbean countries have tried to address this issue through a variety of policy measures. Common measures to date have been to expand technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to offer alternative pathways; offer literacy intervention programmes that have a particular focus on boys, mentorship and male role models; enhance data collection and monitoring systems; and apply early intervention strategies in primary grades. However, given that patterns and trends have remained largely unchanged, it appears that these approaches have been inadequate to address the scope and depth of the educational failure seen among boys and that there is a need for a more comprehensive and holistic approach (Kerr-Edwards, 2025).

While diverse policy measures are required and perhaps will continue to be experimented with, the Caribbean would benefit from a collaborative institutional solution to its current challenges, especially to address the need to provide a comprehensive yet labour-market-oriented skills-based education to young men and women who come from the most disadvantaged contexts. The region must shape its educational responses in a manner that is futuristic in nature and allows the introduction of innovative reforms leading to new and contemporary configurations.

The proposition for the initiative is not based on a deficit model for disadvantaged learners; rather it is a proposition for a creative and holistic schooling experience that will prepare young people for the fast-changing modern world in which technology occupies a central space in many walks of life.

This concept note argues the case for establishing a regional innovative open school that is inclusive and provides high-quality education, with special emphasis on the needs of the Caribbean, and presents a conceptual framework for such an initiative.

1.0 Why Open Schooling?

An open model of schooling is being suggested here primarily because of its high potential for reach, flexibility and relevance for addressing contemporary needs and challenges (UNESCO, 2025). Open and distance learning (ODL)-based schooling has also been critiqued for being closed and distant in its administrative and pedagogic approaches. In addition, the literature recommends paying close attention to issues relating to equity, diversity and inclusion and notes that approaches developed for addressing these issues in the Global North may not always be applicable in the Global South (Iniesto & Bossu, 2023). The critique of the open systems of schooling in a number of developing contexts often has its roots in the fact that ODL is recommended for those who have the least resources and often need more support and handholding. Those factors mean ODL, as usually practised, may not be the most suitable approach for them. These critiques consider the conventional ODL system, which is based on correspondence courses, as "distant" and the modern one, which is heavily dependent on technology, as "inaccessible" for those who are from marginalised backgrounds (Jha & Ghatak, 2023, p. 502).

Distance in this context often refers to "transactional distance" (Moore, 1997). However, discussions about the concept of transactional distance often ignore the fact that it is not a feature of only ODL-based education systems. There is plenty of evidence to show that the traditional face-to-face system can be equally or more rigid and distant, even if not overtly discriminatory to those who are on the margin, including girls, racial or religious minorities or learners from economically deprived backgrounds (Jha et al., 2024). The added element that is often ignored in this debate is the absence of space for creativity and diversity in either system. It is not only those who are visibly marginalised who face problems in a classroom. Learners who do not fit tidily into the often homogenous and rigid learning paths and uniform assessment systems also face isolation and rejection.

The Covid-19 pandemic added a twist to the debate by establishing the need for resilience and opening up the possibilities for blended learning and hybrid forms of education delivery. It also shattered the myth of universal technological penetration, as evidence of technology-rooted exclusion kept surfacing.

Overall, the various debates and experiences to date, with all their nuances including contradictory pointers, have unambiguously established the need for reform in schooling systems based on a change in direction that allows for harnessing the best of both conventional and ODL-based schooling (ECLAC-UNESCO, 2020).

This concept note proposes a model of open schooling that has creative and inclusive potential and pays attention to the need for diversity in its pedagogical and administrative approaches. The proposed model draws on ideas from both the existing literature and a number of contemporary practices in educational institutions. The idea of open schooling is not limited to ODL-based schooling: Sarid et al. (2025) conducted an extensive review and analysis of the literature and practices and developed a table that presents three generic meanings of open schooling in educational discourse. Although there are some overlaps, they are essentially very different from each other. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. Three generic meanings of "open schooling" in educational discourse

Open schooling concept	Central tenets	Main descriptors
Open education and classrooms (e.g. Morrison, 2022)	Student-centred learning, student-choice and authenticity	The autonomy of students to direct their own learning, flexible curriculum, constructivist pedagogy, freedom of expression and authentic personal development
Online and distance learning (e.g. Abrioux & Ferreira, 2009)	Inclusiveness, mobility, accessibility to education, and employability	Physical separation between learners and teachers, use of ICTs and educational technologies, different pedagogies and learning methodologies that enable wide participation in terms of when, with whom, and where learning is conducted
Community-based approach (e.g. EC, 2015, 2024)	School-as-community, community collaboration, social problem-solving	Breaking down school walls and collaborating with various community stakeholders to connect learning to the real-world and society, solve social problems and equip citizens with the needed to skills to succeed in modern complex societies

Source: From "Reconceptualizing open schooling: Towards a multidimensional model of school openness," by J. Sarid, A. Boeve-de Pauw, M. Christodoulou, N. Doms, D. Gericke, P. Goldman, A. Reis, S. Veldkamp, S. Walan and M. C. P. J. Knippels, 2025, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *57*(2), p. 228 (https://doi.org/ 10.1080/00220272.2024.2392592). Open access.

The present note uses the open education approach to argue for an innovative open schooling model that draws from all of these strands. While keeping in mind the need to nurture learners to develop their critical thinking skills and help them become not only adept learners but also responsible, sensitive human beings, the new model must help democratic governments develop comprehensive, resilient education systems that speak to the fast-changing needs of highly technological economies and individuals' needs for creativity. If we are to achieve this goal, we must step away from the dichotomous and binary-based discourse and embrace a more comprehensive model.

2.0 Breaking Boundaries

An important element of the proposed model is that it should break boundaries — boundaries that often form the core of the existing education systems. These boundaries are frequently presented in the form of *either-or* options. We must go beyond that binary approach and break some of the boundaries to develop a more robust and responsive education system.

Conventional vs Open

A classroom meant for face-to-face sessions between teachers and students is an inalienable backstay of the formal, or so-called conventional, education system. An important feature of the open system is that such a classroom is often absent. Learners and educators can connect regardless of how far apart they are. Although online, or so-called open, elements have been widely adopted in the conventional system and face-to-face interactive elements appear frequently in the various open systems, the two systems continue to be defined as very distinct and mutually exclusive.

It is time to break this dichotomy and view them as complementary, where "blended" becomes the norm and the tilt towards "open" or "classroom" elements is decided on a case-by-case basis according to the course, its objectives, the target

learners, etc. In Malawi and Mozambique, for example, open schools are conventional day schools that provide support for open learners outside of regular school hours. Some centres also provide flipped classrooms that open learners can access in the mornings, afternoons and sometimes even the evenings, weekends or holidays. This option allows the same physical infrastructure to support many more learners.

Academic (Knowledge) vs Vocational (Skills)

Separating academic and vocational streams that signify knowledge and skills respectively at the secondary stage of schooling is common in both the so-called conventional and open systems. While there is no doubt that the two streams are distinct, it is important to realise that they are also complementary, and separating streams in the early stages of education may lead to a number of undesirable consequences. For example, it is known to have led to a hierarchy of streams whereby knowledge streams are considered superior to vocational streams. This pattern does not acknowledge that vocational training is essentially the application of knowledge and that the varied application of knowledge leads to the evolution of new knowledge. Hence, one is incomplete without the other. Furthermore, in the early stages of education, including secondary education, learners must be exposed to both kinds of streams and disciplines to help them choose between continuing on to post-secondary education and entering the labour market.

It is possible to break this boundary by redesigning curricula and ensuring that both academic and vocational areas are included in the courses that are needed to complete secondary and senior secondary education. This would also address the need to accommodate diverse individual preferences and respond to fast-changing labour market demands.

Quality vs Equity

It is not uncommon to hear that it is challenging to include those who face deprivations because of gender, race, location, disability, etc. and that quality suffers if you do so. It is indeed challenging to be inclusive, as it requires addressing and responding to specific, and often wide-ranging, needs. However, no education system that delivers quality to only a select few who enjoy certain privileges can be considered a high-quality one.

We must view inclusivity as a necessary challenge and not a dilemma. Inclusion is implicit in quality. Any learner who does not feel included is likely to find it difficult to engage mentally with the process of learning. The system needs the appropriate resources to help all learners feel included — and given that learners may feel excluded for a wide range of reasons, multiple types of resources are needed.

School Environment vs Social Environment

The school environment has long been seen as an important part of the learning environment, but the importance of the home or social environment has also been recognised, especially in the context of understanding disengagement and failure (Wilmont, 2025). Schools' limited ability to influence the social environment is understandable, especially in the context of conventional systems. However, in the case of open provision, and to some extent even in the conventional system, the social or outside-school environment is also the learning environment and assumes critical significance. For the learner, it is a continuum: both school and the home/community space contribute to socialisation. The social environment shapes the learner's experiences and responses, in both open and conventional education systems. It is important to recognise this and include measures for creating supportive processes for learners' social environment — both in and beyond school.

3.0 What Constitutes Innovative and Inclusive Open Schooling (IIOS)?

Most of the existing open schooling systems are based on a three-pronged approach (see Figure 1). Learning resources are made available and accessible using either or both correspondence and technology. Contact classes are often offered on a compulsory or optional basis, and learner support is made available, often using a multi-modular approach: phone-ins, FAQs, online support, etc.

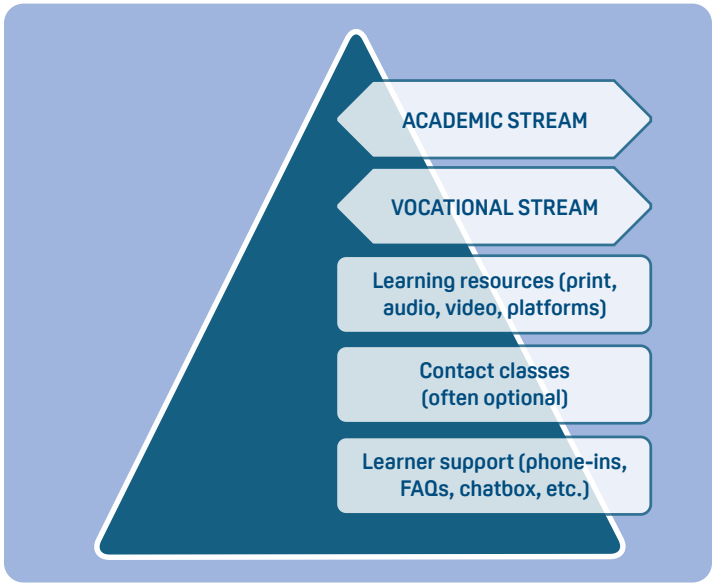

Figure 1. Prevalent open school model at the secondary/senior secondary level.

As mentioned earlier, most existing models maintain established boundaries. The innovative and inclusive open schooling (IIOS) concept is built on the notion of breaking these boundaries. Drawing from a few experiences in multiple countries, it proposes a model that could address some of the limitations of existing systems in both the open and conventional modes. The proposed model aims to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

Figure 2 summarises the proposed model, conceptualised loosely for the secondary level, especially the senior secondary stage.

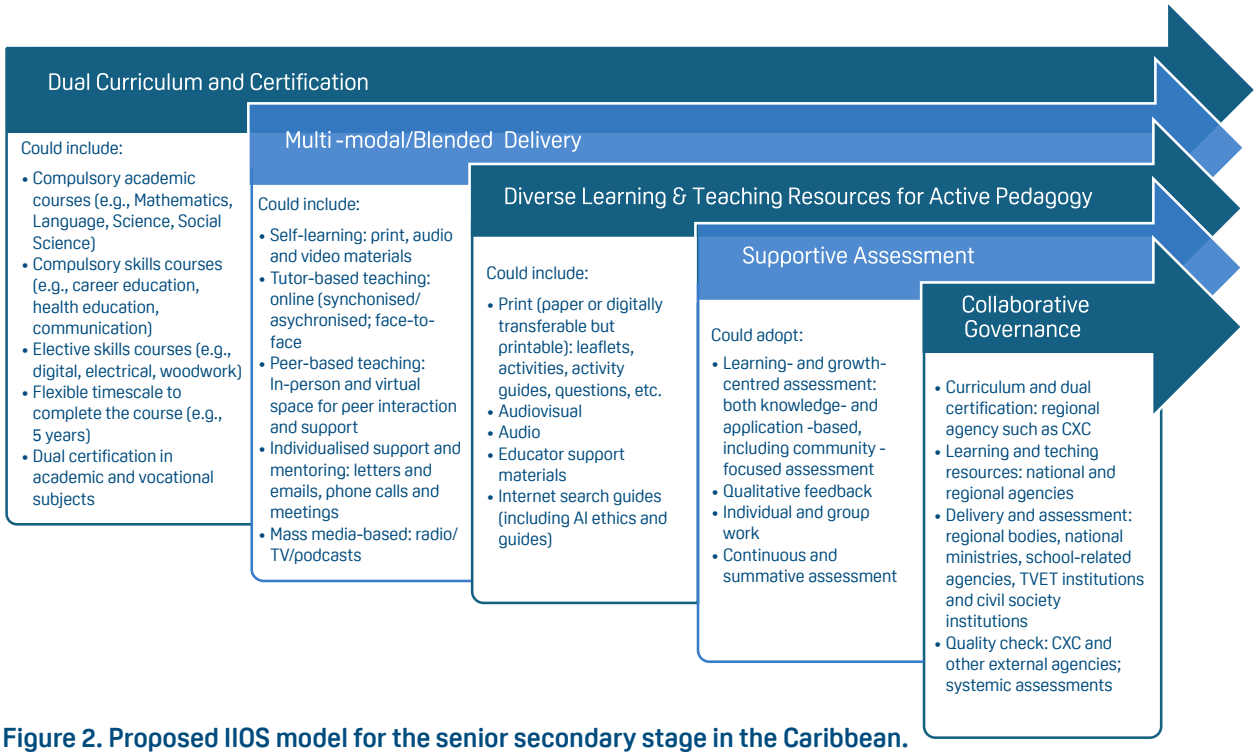

Figure 2. Proposed IIOS model for the senior secondary stage in the Caribbean.

Dual Curricula and Dual Certification

In order to break the hierarchy of subjects or disciplines and give students a comprehensive education, we must move to a curriculum that places equal importance on academic and skills-based subjects, without advantaging one over the other. This would require no streaming, even at the senior secondary stage. Students would have to choose both academic and skills-based courses, albeit with some in-built flexibility. Compulsory academic and skills courses could offer a degree of choice — for example, mathematics could be offered at foundational, business-focused or advanced levels, and learners could choose two skills-based courses. This could be envisaged as a dual certification to acknowledge the dual curriculum.

Flexibility of time and space is one of the most important features of the open schooling approach, and that flexibility must be retained. However, the delivery mode suggested in this concept note means that there would be some restrictions on flexibility for the sake of enhancing the learning experience and ensuring quality.

Multi-modal/Blended Delivery

Multi-modal delivery is not uncommon for open systems, as shown in Figure 1. However, the delivery modes used in most existing open schooling models are largely optional and guided by how active the learner is. This has led to low motivation levels among many learners; in turn, they lead to high dropout and attrition rates. These issues can be reversed by looking at learner profiles to identify which delivery mode would work best for each learner and increasing the focus on motivating and mentoring learners (Arfat et al., 2025; Jha & Ghatak, 2023).

What is being proposed here is a careful curation of different modes of delivery — according to the nature of subjects, disciplines and topics, the potential availability of facilities and resources, and learners' prior knowledge — for each course so that diverse learning experiences (e.g., self-learning, peer

learning, tutor-guided learning) are created for all learners in all courses. The mass media modes can be used to reinforce some aspects of learning. The system must recognise that there may be multiple pathways to completion and that all are equally valid (see, for example, Western Cape Government, 2025).

In addition, it is important to recognise the need for individualised support for two reasons:

- Low learner motivation has been identified as a major limitation of the current open models of education delivery and is an issue for schools that have students who come from marginalised contexts.
- Individualised support and motivation has been identified as a major influence on the success of men and boys who succeed against the odds (Wilmont, 2025).

Therefore, building in mechanisms for individualised support and mentoring is proposed as an essential component of the delivery mode.

Diverse Learning and Teaching Resources for Active Pedagogy

Diversity of delivery modes calls for diversity of learning resources: print, audiovisual, audio, etc. However, those resources should also be designed in a manner that promotes activity-based pedagogy, thus fulfilling a number of objectives simultaneously. For example, learners could be asked to complete an open-ended survey about flora and fauna in their local neighbourhood. The survey could be sent as a print or digital document through the post, by email or through the use of a digital platform — whichever is most appropriate for the context, including availability and accessibility of resources.

The activity could have flexibility built in by allowing students to complete it through online searches, talking to people and/or physically visiting and examining certain areas. It would enable learners to actively engage in the topic, use diverse modes to explore and investigate it and report back on their findings. In this way, the entire activity would cover several competencies and knowledge areas at the same time.

Another important aspect of creating and using diverse resources is to include new types of materials such as guides for doing effective Internet searches and best practices for using — and not using — artificial intelligence (AI). It is not just about *what* is taught. It is also about *how* it is taught, supported and assessed (Naidu et al., 2025).

Supportive Assessment

Like most regions, the Caribbean has tried to adopt a new approach to assessment to move away from an examination-centric system. The assessment approach for the open system proposed in this concept note would need to address three distinct objectives:

- Help learners understand their progress, including their strengths and areas that need further attention.
- Help teachers assess each individual's progress and recognise whether the resources/pedagogy they are applying are working well or not.
- Help the system know where it stands in terms of the progress and quality of learning.

It is important to acknowledge that these are distinct objectives, and the same tools and processes would not provide all the answers — some tools could be applied in multiple contexts, but others would need to be specific. For example, a sample-based learning outcomes survey can be a useful tool to provide feedback to the system on methods adopted, but it cannot be used as a tool for individual feedback. Individual feedback must be based on an assessment system that is designed to be supportive of learning; includes a variety of skills and knowledge areas, competencies using diverse modes (e.g., individual and group work) and different forms of expression and application; and is continuous as well as summative.

Collaborative Governance and Management

Breaking the boundaries of the current delivery modes also calls for collaborative governance. From curriculum design and resources to delivery, assessment and certification, this would require active collaboration between national ministries of education, TVET agencies, civil society organisations and school certification boards and regional agencies such as CXC. Figure 3 presents the envisaged roles and responsibilities of the respective organisations.

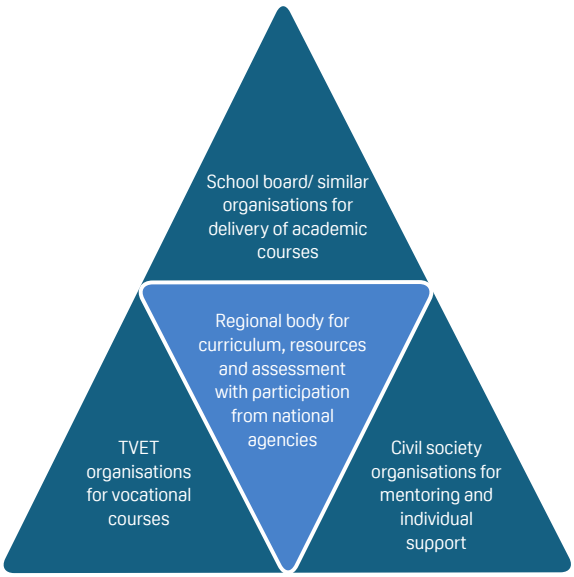

Figure 3. Envisaged roles of regional and in-country agencies.

Collaborative management and governance are important in this concept for legal, technical, operational and contextual reasons.

A regional approach to curricula and assessment is being suggested here for a variety of reasons, with similarity of contexts and the potential for the efficient use of resources, including technology and micro-credentials, being the most important. However, establishing a common curriculum and certification at a regional level demands the engagement of both national and regional agencies. In addition, a common curriculum does not mean a homogenous curriculum: while the curricular goals and big ideas could be similar, the delivery could be made contextual and be guided by national and sub-national agendas.

Collaboration will be needed at three levels: national, international and national-regional.

- **National level:** Education departments, a designated body for academic disciplines, TVET agencies and civil society organisations would need to act in tandem with one common agency to hold them together.
- **International level:** Agencies and institutions, including education departments, TVET agencies and civil society organisations, would need to collaborate with their counterparts in other countries for the delivery and exchange of resources and credits.
- **National-regional level:** National agencies and institutions would work together with regional agencies such as CXC or CANTA to contribute to and make use of the common curricula, resources and assessments.

4.0 Why the Caribbean?

The reasons for proposing this innovative solution for the Caribbean region are manifold. One, almost all countries in the region are facing the issue of male disengagement, which requires a systemic and comprehensive, contemporary solution. Although the idea of a regional innovative open school is not limited to meeting the needs of boys, it has the potential to address the issue of their disengagement

from education and so is important from that perspective. Two, regional structures such as CXC are present in the region and so can build on CXC's mandate for developing regional curricula and examining authorities to embrace and operationalise this idea. Three, the Caribbean Association of National Training Authorities (CANTA) has already adopted blended TVET and started to work with a number of national TVET agencies, which has created a level of preparedness for a new approach to teaching and learning in the region. In addition, the TVET agencies and regulatory structures in many countries in the region are also responsible for the regulation of training (skills or vocational education) at the senior secondary level. Four, the small size and the very nature of the island economies unite them in their needs, creating the potential for more efficient and effective use of existing and future educational resources. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) region has expressed a need for a paradigm shift in the context of education and is committed to the "four policy imperatives of the CARICOM Human Resource Development (HRD) 2030 Strategy: Access, Equity, Relevance, Quality" (CARICOM, 2024).

The proposed new approach could be piloted with only senior secondary courses, and if it proves successful, could be extended to other secondary stages.

Operationalising the Concept of Innovative Open Schooling in the Caribbean

Several Caribbean countries have explored the idea of starting an open school but have not moved towards the operationalising stage (as per COL's knowledge and understanding at the time of writing). This situation presents an opportunity: There is both interest and the possibility of starting something that is innovative and robust. The existence of an active CXC that has significant expertise and experience in the area of curriculum and assessments at the regional level adds to this opportunity.

Figure 4 shows the key stages of operationalising the concept of an innovative open school in any context. The operationalisation of each stage includes several prerequisites. Here the focus is on prerequisites in the context of the Caribbean.

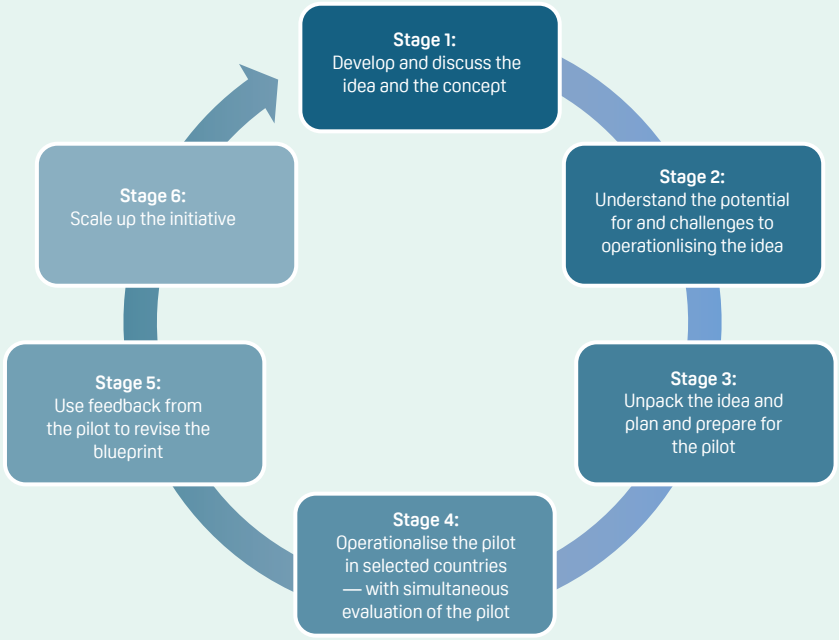

Figure 4. Key stages of operationalising the concept of innovative open schooling.

Table 2. Key stages, action areas and stakeholders for piloting the idea of innovative open senior secondary schooling in the Caribbean

Stage	Actions and prerequisites	Stakeholders / Agencies responsible	Risks
Stage 1: Develop and discuss the idea and the concept	Develop a concept note and organise an opportunity to discuss it	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, CXC, academics and civil society organisations. COL (leads in developing the note)	Limited engagement with the idea
Stage 2: Understand the potential for and challenges to operationalising the idea	Develop short case studies to understand the country-level potential for and barriers to implementing the idea (legal, institutional, technical and technological, human resource-related, financial) in selected countries Explore the possibility of developing a regional curricular and certification framework to implement the idea (regional with national-level participation)	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, academics and civil society organisations COL and CXC (lead in being responsible for conducting and analysing the case studies)	Limited resources Limited engagement from key stakeholders Limited capacities
Stage 3: Unpack the idea and plan and prepare for the pilot in selected countries	Develop a business plan with details about legal, technical, administrative, financial and human resource arrangements Identify and pool resources (regional with national-level participation) Secure a commitment to participate from respective governments and other associated agencies	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, academics and civil society organisations CXC and other identified agencies, COL	Limited resources Limited engagement from key stakeholders Limited capacities
Stage 4: Operationalise the pilot in selected countries — with simultaneous evaluation of the pilot	Presence of a detailed and agreed-upon blueprint from participating countries/ agencies Confirm a budget and other resources with clear allocations for the pilot exist; other arrangements are facilitated by participating agencies Clear arrangements with respective responsibilities for simultaneous evaluation	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, academics and civil society organisations CXC and other identified agencies, COL	Limited resources Limited engagement from key stakeholders Limited capacities
Stage 5: Use feedback from the pilot to revise the blueprint	Clear opportunities for active feedback on pilots exist Process for integrating reasonable feedback and agreement on revised plan determined and followed	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, academics and civil society organisations CXC and other identified agencies, COL	Limited resources Limited engagement from key stakeholders Limited capacities
Stage 6: Scale up the initiative	Presence of a clear commitment, plan and budget with responsibilities and timeline (in other words, a clear business model) exists for scaling up	Ministries of education, TVET agencies, academics and civil society organisations CXC and other identified agencies	Limited resources Limited engagement from key stakeholders Limited capacities

Table 2 outlines the key stages, action areas and stakeholders for piloting innovative open senior secondary schooling in the Caribbean. Careful preparation, including paying close attention to details, before operationalising the idea is crucial so that it offers a systemic and long-term solution for the issues it wants to address.

This proposition presupposes an active collaboration at national, international and regional levels and in diverse manners. Therefore, it is important to understand the potential challenges and enablers related to several dimensions, including legal, institutional, technical and technological, human resource-related and financial. A few sample country case studies could help in this respect. Similarly, it would be important to understand the human and financial implications of developing, delivering, assessing and certifying such a curriculum across an entire region.

If the evidence gathered from stages 1 and 2 clearly indicates that this idea has strong potential to be operational, stakeholders can move to stage 3. This third stage would involve preparing a business plan with a view to conducting pilots and then upscaling, depending on the success of the pilots.

This note is the first step towards this proposition. It is expected to serve as a concept note for discussion and brainstorming, thus forming a foundation for planning next steps.

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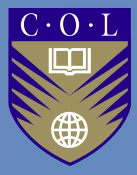

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