OECS Declaration on Education Statement

ACADEMIC RECOVERY PROGRAMME
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OECS DECLARATION ON EDUCATION

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Preamble

Since 1981, the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States has been committed to promoting regional integration across its Member States. In the domain of education, the Education Development Management Unit at the OECS Commission has spearheaded these efforts through the development and implementation of a range of programmes across education systems in Member States. Such initiatives include:

1. The development of the OECS Education Sector Strategy 2012-2026;

2. The harmonisation of curricula across Member States and the introduction of the OECS Learning Standards;

3. The promotion of literacy through programmes such as the OECS/USAID Early Learners' Program;

4. The centralization of the procurement and allocation of learning resources and the development of open education resources;

5. The development of the OECS Education Sector Response to Covid-19 and Guidelines for the Continuity of Learning;

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted areas of vulnerability and challenges that must be addressed to realise the OECS vision 2020-2024 of "A better quality of life for the people of the OECS". The following areas continue to be a cause for concern:

1. Low resilience in education systems to adapt and respond to emergencies;

2. Lack of harmonised education policy and dynamic, visionary education leadership across Member States;

3. Unsatisfactory knowledge and skill levels of secondary school graduates, who are unable to successfully join the workforce or transition to tertiary education;

4. Low achievement of males across the education system;

5. Low access to quality education, particularly for pre-primary learners and learners with special educational needs;

6. A need to reform teacher preparation, and develop more rigorous qualification and selection criteria, so that the best candidates are equipped with the best techniques and strategies to achieve the goals of the curriculum;

7. A need for diversified approaches to curriculum and assessment development, that reflect the relevant knowledge and skills learners need for the future;

8. Lack of Caribbean-based research on the science of learning to inform data-driven education reform.

Additionally, the environmental vulnerability of the OECS Member States compounds these concerns, as these small island states are subject to the threat of climate change and natural hazards such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions.

The OECS Declaration on Education Statement builds on the vision of the OECS Education Sector Strategy 2012-2026 that Every Learner Succeeds and the goal of advancing socio-economic development through quality education that allows all citizens to reach their full potential. This document outlines the twenty-six articles of the declaration across three thematic areas:

1. The OECS vision for education;
2. Harmonisation of education policy;
3. Partnerships and collaboration.

These themes and the related articles were developed from a series of consultations with education stakeholders across Member States in 2021 and 2022.

The OECS vision for education

Article 1. OECS Education

1.1. The purpose of education in the OECS is to foster the whole person development of citizens from early childhood to adulthood who are:

- empowered by a regional identity grounded in a nuanced understanding of the history and heritage of the region;

- encouraged to develop a social consciousness that honours regional history and heritage by embodying the spirit of regional integration in all facets of life;

- committed to move beyond philosophical stances and act to develop and promote indigenous knowledge for the betterment of the regional community and self.

1.2. The core values of empowerment through self-knowledge and commitment to regional kinship above self-interest, must form the basis for educational innovation and transformation across Member States. Education systems should prepare all learners as citizens to lead a wider economic, social, and cultural transformation across the region.

1.3. A much-needed redefinition, not refinement, of the purpose of an OECS education must expand notions of what it means to be educated. Achievements outside of academics, in the arts, sports, technological innovation, and entrepreneurship should also be given equal recognition.

Article 2. Enhancing resilience

2.1. Environmental vulnerability. The blessings of nature's bounty, which we enjoy as the result of our geography, must be met responsibly with the grounded knowledge of our

equally precarious geographic context. Instilling this understanding in all citizens must be the foundation of education and training about climate, agriculture, and food security, from early childhood to adulthood.

2.2. Mitigate risks, plan for crises, and build in flexibility. A resilient education system is the cornerstone of a resilient society. Lessons from crises past and present, and preparation for those not yet known, must inform the structure, management, and operation of education systems. Agile, flexible, and adaptable systems must be the goal.

2.3 Economic vulnerability. Economic activity derived from products dependent on our geography, such as tourism and agriculture, is precarious because they are affected by environmental and public health disasters. Education needs to prepare citizens for building a more diversified and resilient economy to absorb such shocks.

Article 3. Quality and equity

3.1. Every person has an inalienable right to a basic and secondary education. Education must provide learners with, at minimum, an acceptable quality of learning, which includes but is not limited to literacy, oral expression, numeracy, problem-solving, soft skills and digital literacy skills.

3.2. Promoting inclusivity. An active commitment must be made, and demonstrated in concrete, identifiable practices, to address discrimination and exclusion of any kind due to social origin, socio-economic status, language, ability, gender, or any other characteristic. Support must also be extended to learners to ensure that social barriers do not prohibit access to educational opportunities.

3.3. Quality education at all levels, with particular focus on early childhood. All learners must be provided with opportunities to access quality education from early childhood to adulthood. Such an education would provide them with the skills and tools that are most appropriate for the full development of their abilities and that offer them the opportunity to socially and economically advance and to be full and contributing members of their local and national communities. Substantial progress has been made in promoting universal access to early childhood education, but more work is needed to standardise and improve the quality of the offerings across Member States. A high-quality education is sufficiently funded, well-resourced and offers learners choice in their learning pathways. A high-quality education also offers training in soft skills and life skills. Suggested areas of interest include, but are not limited to, preparation for the world of work, filing taxes, personal finance and budgeting, voting and citizenship.

Harmonisation of education policy

Article 4. Digital transformation

4.1. The harmonisation of education policy. Harmonisation of education policy has long been a goal of policy harmonisation more broadly in the OECS. The harmonisation of education policy will be a necessary precursor to digital transformation in the education sector. Collaborations in the development of the OECS Primary Harmonised Curriculum and OECS Education Sector Strategy, and in the implementation of several initiatives with

external development partners, are some steps taken towards general education policy harmonisation so far. Further harmonisation, regarding education legislation that makes education a right accessible to all persons from early childhood to adulthood, should be considered. Harmonised education policy must also address the establishment of student records and database systems, accreditation standards, teacher training standards, teacher licensing, equitable education funding for all levels of the education system in Member States and the integration of EdTech.

4.2. Hybrid learning beyond the pandemic. Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for more agile and flexible education systems. There is also a need, as previously highlighted, to improve system resilience given the ever-present danger of environmental disasters and the possibility of ongoing or future health crises in the region. A hybrid education system that leverages regionally developed technological innovations meaningfully to offer multiple modalities is essential to such endeavours. Such a system will also require the development of a high level of digital skills for students, parents, teachers and other education stakeholders. Existing accountability measures for face-to-face instruction must also be put in place for online and remote learning. This must include accountability measures for students, parents and teachers. Guidelines for the establishment of suitable learning environments away from the physical classroom should also inform parents and other community members on how to best support learners. Student support and special interest groups, and extracurricular communities in a hybrid modality can also be established.

4.3. Emphasis on improving technological infrastructure. One of the most urgent challenges noted in the transition to digital learning responding to the COVID-19 pandemic has been the poor level of internet connectivity offered by the existing infrastructure. An OECS approach to addressing this issue that is aligned with the CARICOM Single ICT Space is required. Similarly, it is also necessary to ensure that other considerations, such as access to and the maintenance of relevant devices to support a hybrid learning environment, are formally outlined in an OECS EdTech policy. School, home and community-based environments outfitted with technological infrastructure to facilitate hybrid and remote learning modalities must also be considered.

Article 5. Evidence-based curriculum and assessment reform

5.1. An evidence-based curriculum that reflects the purpose of an OECS education. The curriculum should serve as the main tool for implementation of the OECS' vision of education. Research based in the OECS and the wider Caribbean community should inform curriculum and assessment reform to develop the OECS citizen, outlined in Article 1.1. An expansion of the curriculum to include Technical and Vocational Education and Training opportunities across all education levels and an emphasis on entrepreneurship and technological innovation, must also be considered. The curriculum should reflect a balance of both the knowledge and skills needed for the future, while also offering students meaningful, individualised learning experiences. Research-informed approaches to curriculum and resource development, student support and remediation would also be beneficial. Opportunities for enhanced project-based learning, ongoing collaboration and greater coherence between educational levels must also be explored.

5.2 Teacher professional development and support. A redefinition of education that encourages greater involvement and participation of students as equal partners in the teaching and learning exchange is required. Teacher qualifications should be reviewed with a view to expand the initial training period where necessary, with longer trainee placements and a teacher licence that is renewed through the completion of continuing education requirements. The OECS professional development model can also be used to inform the structure and implementation of professional development and continuing education courses. An OECS teacher network can be established across Member States, to foster knowledge sharing of best practices, to promote teacher collaboration and to provide a space for teachers to share experiences and discuss well-being. An expansion of the teaching model that allows for the deployment of teacher assistants to support classroom teaching and administrative responsibilities should also be explored.

5.3. Assessment. Assessment should be more varied to reflect a move away from summative assessment approaches to more authentic forms of assessment across the education system. By embracing more varied assessment methods, teachers and students obtain a more accurate understanding of learners' progress and what needs to be done to improve learning. More flexible forms of assessment can contribute to the goal of increasing the adaptability and responsiveness of education systems in crises. Diagnostic assessments also play an important role in supporting student achievement. The establishment and deployment of OECS model diagnostic tests should also be considered. Pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher professional development can also address the development and implementation of these assessments.

Article 6. Expanded learning pathways

6.1. Differentiated learning. A more robust approach to differentiation that centres learners' needs must inform the design of education programmes and education reforms. The extent to which the system meets these needs must form the basis of periodic system evaluations. Systems should seek to explore a variety of modalities to support learners, including, but not limited to, radio, television, and EdTech platforms.

6.2. Sports, the creative and performing arts. The expansion of learning pathways to move beyond a sole emphasis on academics to include sports, the creative and performing arts, entrepreneurship and technological innovation is necessary for the redefinition of the purpose of an OECS education outlined in Article 1.3. Financial and policy-level support for further development of these areas as integral parts of the curriculum and assessment framework will ensure varied educational offerings that represent the interests of all education stakeholders and the promotion of local and regional heritage.

Partnerships and collaboration

Article 7. Strengthening stakeholder participation and accountability

7.1. Parental involvement. One of the most important factors in predicting learner success is the strength of the school-home-community tripartite. Increased engagement of parent-teacher associations at national and regional levels is essential to maintaining strong bonds between learners, their homes and communities, and schools. Ministries of

education must actively seek engagement with these associations and ensure that all community members are represented in discussions on how best to support learners in the classroom as well as in the home and broader community to reach their potential. Guidance should also be provided to parents on how to encourage, support and affirm students.

7.2. Student involvement — national and regional student councils. Giving prominence to learner voice is also a key consideration in charting the path for the future of education. Education leaders, teachers, parents and other stakeholders must not simply work for learners but with them. Learners are best placed to inform other stakeholders about their experiences of teaching and learning processes and the realities of the education system. The inclusion of their voice in the decision-making process is fundamental. The establishment of and support for national and regional student councils and other youth groups can contribute to structured engagement with learners about education reforms and the future of OECS education. The development, training and funding of such groups must also be a priority area, so that student-student mentor groups can be established. Importantly, student voice should be a prominent part of teacher performance appraisals. They should contribute to teacher performance appraisals by using instruments such as the OECS Teacher Appraisal. Their contributions should influence future teacher performance.

7.3. Accountability and leadership. Accountability and strong, dynamic leadership are cornerstones of good education policy and governance. Leadership must be visionary and participatory. Stakeholders must strive to hold each other accountable to ensure that all are actively engaging in the continued development of an OECS education. Education systems are essentially human systems, and transformation and change of the system must begin at the human level. Students, parents, teachers, school administration, ministry officials, community and religious groups should be involved in decision-making processes. Good policy requires strong leadership. Strong participatory leadership from all stakeholders and accountability structures, such as oversight of the management of resources, monitoring and evaluation of initiatives and periodic system performance reviews, are requirements for a future system that is responsive, adaptive, and transformative. A participatory framework should allow stakeholders to experience the education system from the vantage point of others, to have a first-hand account of the experiences of those delivering and on the receiving end of education policies and initiatives.

Article 8. Intersectoral support for the most vulnerable

8.1. Improving social safety nets. An educational system which aims to cater to all persons must take into consideration the impact of social disadvantages on learners and their ability to access and benefit from a quality education. Learners from these backgrounds may need material support in the form of school uniforms and textbooks, nutritional support before and during the school day, and additional psychosocial support. Meeting these needs is a prerequisite for learners to have equitable access to education offerings. Additionally, selective practices, such as streaming classes, fail to address the challenges marginalised learners face, and risk perpetuating inequities. In place of these selective practices, a holistic approach to catering to the needs of learners must be

developed. This will require intersectoral collaboration with ministries of education, social services, health, and others.

8.2 Improving psychosocial support. Psychosocial needs become more apparent during long-term school closures. These closures isolate both students, teachers, and school leaders from the school community. This can negatively impact the performance of these groups and lead to exhaustion and even burnout. Mental well-being and healthy relationships between teachers and students facilitate an optimal learning experience. A commitment to improving mental well-being requires an investment in increasing the number of available counsellors across the education system.

8.3. Learners with Special Educational Needs. An action plan for enhancing the inclusion of learners with special educational needs at all educational levels should be developed in collaboration with key stakeholders, such as parent-teacher associations. This plan would also outline learning pathways for gifted and talented students. Areas of concern such as how to best accommodate these learners in the physical and virtual spaces where learning takes place and in curriculum and assessment standards and post-graduate opportunities should be addressed.

8.4. Learners / students at risk and individuals in conflict with the law. Learners in conflict with the law should also have access to education, including vocational training. Such programmes must ensure that these learners also have the opportunity to reach the accreditation and assessment standards available to others. These programmes must be tailored in such a way that they contribute to the full development of learners' capacities and skills, tools, and values which may help them reintegrate into their communities socially and economically. This will require collaboration with family and social affairs government ministries and private sector actors and include insights from the Juvenile Justice Reform project.

Article 9. Expansion of public- and private-sector relationships

9.1. Public-private partnerships. A further pillar of strengthening stakeholder participation and engagement is the development of public-private partnerships. Engagement with the private sector should inform education reforms beyond discussions of funding. Curriculum and assessment reforms can also benefit from private-sector perspectives on the extent to which the education system adequately prepares learners for the future of work. Specifically, this can include inputs on the role of collaboration and digital skills for the future and how to shape learners to be potential leaders of innovation and entrepreneurship.

9.2. Career guidance, mentorship and apprenticeship programmes. Public-private partnerships can foster more structured and hands-on education programmes for learners to develop the skills necessary to be successful upon graduation through mentorship, internship and apprenticeship opportunities. These partnerships can also establish or further strengthen career guidance programmes across all education levels in Member States. Opportunities for mobility and student exchange schemes across Member States and language immersion opportunities can also be explored.

9.3 Multi-sectoral collaboration. An OECS Multi-sectoral strategy can be developed to promote collaboration between government agencies and ministries (such as those

concerned with social transformation, justice and health). This strategy will also encourage collaboration across government ministries, private and local and international non-profits and other development partners. An initial set of tools which may be used to this end have already been developed as part of Phase II of the OECS Academic Recovery Programme.