When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Jamaica in March 2020, the government suspended all classes and encouraged the use of online learning platforms to keep students engaged. School leaders were tasked with developing plans to move teaching online and ensure the continuation of quality learning and teaching for all students. However, this rapid shift posed many challenges as they were expected to adapt quickly and demonstrate their instructional leadership skills of managing content delivery, curriculum oversight, staff morale and engagement along with student and family participation and standards in an online setting.

In April 2020, UNICEF partnered with the National College for Educational Leadership (NCEL) and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information (MoEYI) to create a Virtual Instructional Leadership (VIL) course to help all public, private and independent school leaders of early childhood, primary and secondary institutions gain exposure to relevant technology and improve their knowledge of various tools, resources, platforms and practices of leading remotely.

The free online course strongly aligns with the MoEYI's priority of using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve educational outcomes at all levels. Building capacity among school leaders to perform effectively in virtual spaces is critical to supporting current efforts by the MoEYI to boost remote engagement across the education sector.

The VIL course was developed to enhance the ICT competencies of school leaders while enabling them to deliver quality student-centred educational services and to monitor and evaluate the performance of both staff and students using e-learning platforms. It provides a strong foundation for teaching with technology and explores online teaching design and delivery, while providing strategies for instructional supervision and management and sustainability of schools’ e-infrastructures. The VIL course was specifically designed to help provide solutions for complex challenges that may emerge while leading in a remote environment.
RESULTS

The NCEL reported that the original programme target of 500 school leaders accessing and completing the course within the funding period of 9 months has been exceeded since the course was first launched in June 2020. As of September 2021, 2,428 school leaders have finished the course (27 cohorts).

The course supported school leaders' management and supervision of teachers using e-learning platforms and provided them with a strong foundation for teaching with technology while providing strategies for instructional supervision, and responding to MOEYI's efforts to boost remote engagement among teachers and students.

“The course was so engaging, informative, organised. It was structured in a way that was user-friendly and it caters to individuals of all learning styles. The platforms, the content and information shared with us were excellent. I deem it an honour to have been given the awesome opportunity to be a part of this programme, especially in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic that caused disruptions in our normal mode of operation. As I engaged with the content, I pondered, “Where was this course all along?” I must confess that with the knowledge gained I am better prepared to teach my students online and to be a part of the Leadership team that will transform my school during the pandemic and beyond,”” Selisha Robinson, School Leader - Cohort 18.

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Local content** – Due to the pandemic, most of the content used in the course has been international. However, it is important to create more local content reflecting the best local practices so that participants can see how these strategies are being implemented in the Jamaican/Caribbean context.

- **Additional/supplemental resources for advanced participants** – To engage also those participants who have completed a suite of NCEL courses, additional/supplemental resources have been created to respond to their needs and ability levels.

- **Asynchronous approach** – The asynchronous nature of the course provides ease of access as participants have control over their training experience, allowing them to learn at their own pace and convenience. It also allows participants with less advanced skills to reflect on their learning, take their time to assimilate the material, complete responses and develop their critical thinking skills.

- **Virtual support groups** – Each VIL cohort is structured to include a WhatsApp group led by a course facilitator. Many of these groups remain active long after the course ends, providing a medium of communication, support and information sharing among colleagues across the island.

NEXT STEPS

The course is delivered via the NCEL’s Ignito learning management system which ensures sustainability as the course will be permanently available on the platform and will be reviewed and enhanced when necessary.

The NCEL is looking to continue the course over the next three years and open it up to additional participants including the heads of departments, deans of discipline, coordinators and teachers in as many schools as possible. Furthermore, once the COVID-19 pandemic ends, the NCEL, together with UNICEF, would also like to introduce the course to other countries in the Caribbean.

COST EFFICIENCY

The course was designed by the NCEL using its existing learning management system and fully funded by UNICEF in the amount of US $7,817. The cost to administer it has been subsumed by the NCEL as part of its ongoing operations and it is now considered a key course for all school leaders. To date, 2,428 school leaders have finished the course and the NCEL will continue to offer it to different cohorts with the target of reaching every school leader in the approximately 3,000 institutions from early childhood to secondary education over the next three years.

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