

Joint Labor Market Summary

October 2024

(revised October 2025)



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Preface and acknowledgements:

Summary:

In April 2023, the four ministers of education within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, approved the implementation plan and the accompanying budget to perform an assessment and GAP-analyses of the Labor market and how this reflects on the educational system in the Caribbean countries of the Dutch Kingdom. The implementation plan contained a detailed Plan of Action for three priorities. In this case, one of these main priorities, a **Labor Market Analysis**, has been conducted and completed accordingly.

You now have a beautiful, powerful and *unique* report in your hands: a joint research report of the Caribbean part of the Dutch kingdom (CAS) and (BES) with recommendations and research data that has been compiled by researchers and representatives of the designated institutes. This was an exceedingly complex process, but they have completed the task assigned to them with flying colors next to the already individual reports per country that they already delivered. These researchers and institutes in turn represent their country or island. With this joint empirical report, it is expected that, the four ministers of Education within the Dutch Kingdom, will gain enough insight to take short term actions that will be of added value in the nearby future, for among others, a higher percentage of student success, adaptation of the education curriculum and for catering and filling in the vacant labor market positions with young and necessary professionals for the local labor markets.

Assignment description:

These objectives were defined by Strategic Education Alliance (SEA) and were included in the *Plan of Approach Labor Market Analysis* of October 2023.

The designated institutions who accepted and together completed this joint research report are:

- I. The University of Aruba (UA)
- II. The University of Curaçao (UoC)
- III. The University of Sint Maarten (USM)
- IV. Council for Education Labor Market Caribbean Netherlands (ROA Caribbean Netherlands).

Acknowledgements:

As Project leader of this dynamic research group of the labor market analysis, the AMA, I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to the above-mentioned institutes for accepting this unique challenge. Furthermore, a special thank you goes out to the following researchers:

- Ms. Elyane Nicolaas
- Ms. Judette Frederiks
- Mrs. Evisra Carolina
- Mrs. Salys Sultan
- Ms. Carla Vlaun
- Mr. Navin Ganga

This joint report is a reflection of your purposeful research skills and perseverance. We could not have done it without you. Thank you very much.

A special thanks to my colleagues of the SEA program management, especially Ms. Nicole Spellen, to entrust me with this challenging research project. Also, my appreciation to the Minister of Education and Director of Education of Aruba (DEA) as I was able to work together and be available for 100% for this dynamic project. We hope to soon be able to reap the low-hanging fruits of this joint report. Thank you all,

Drs. Samuel E. Dumfries MSc.

Project leader AMA- Labor Market Analyses

Member of the Program Management Team Strategic Education Alliance (SEA)

11th October 2024



Staying on course despite the foggy sea

In 2020, research on students from Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, Sint Eustatius and Sint Maarten following an education in The Netherlands revealed that these students were not performing as well as their counterparts. The causes underlying this discrepancy were found to be inherent to the entire educational chain: from the preparatory didactic levels on the islands to further education in the Netherlands.

In this context, a group of governmental and educational institutions across the Dutch Kingdom joined forces and launched a platform called SEA, an acronym for “Strategic Education Alliance.” The mission of this platform is to increase the academic success of Dutch Caribbean students.

SEA is an appropriate name, well-suited to the maritime landscape of the Caribbean islands. Just as any good captain strives to bring the crew and ship safely to their final destination, the islands also aim to ensure that ‘yiunan di tera ’(island children) successfully complete their studies.

The gaps in the connection between education and the labor market on the islands are, in a sense, comparable to sailing through foggy waters. The fog limits visibility, making it harder to stay on course.

Just as a ship needs a radar to navigate through fog, the region needs support to guide everyone on board safely into the harbor. The challenges the islands face include a lack of data on both education and the labor market, insufficient financial resources, persistent teacher shortages, a lack of long-term visions and strategic planning, and poor communication and collaboration between government and educational organizations within the Kingdom.

A better future for the six islands is within reach if all stakeholders in the field of education and the labor market set their sails in the same direction and steer purposefully toward our common destination: increasing the academic success of all Dutch Caribbean students.

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Attachments:

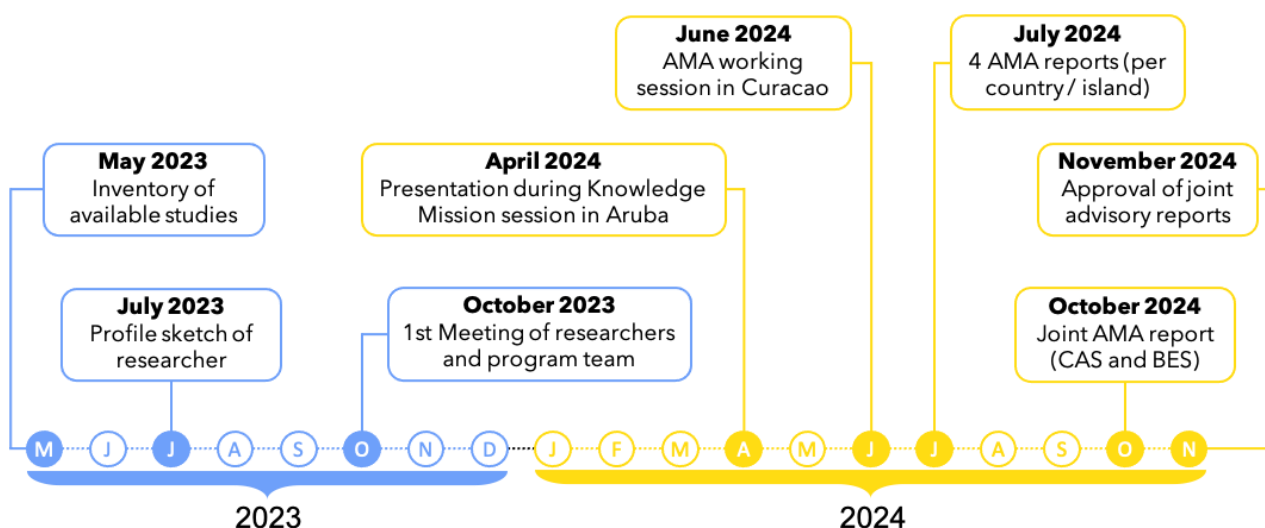
- A: Aruba Labor Market Trends and the Role of Education (University of Aruba; Sultan, Ganga & Mijts, 2024).
- B: Labor Market Analysis Curaçao (University of Curaçao; Eager Eye Advisory, 2024).
- C: Sint Maarten Labor Market Analysis (University of Sint Maarten; Impact Consulting, 2024).
- D: Labor Market Analysis Caribbean Netherlands (ROA CN, 2024).

INTRODUCTION

This joint report summarizes the main findings and recommendations of the following labor market analyses:

- Aruba Labor Market Trends and the Role of Education (University of Aruba; Sultan, Ganga & Mijts, 2024), henceforth referred to as **AUA**.
- Labor Market Analysis Curaçao (University of Curaçao; Eager Eye Advisory, 2024), henceforth referred to as **CUR**.
- Sint Maarten Labor Market Analysis (University of Sint Maarten; Impact Consulting, 2024), henceforth referred to as **SXM**.
- Labor Market Analysis Caribbean Netherlands (ROA CN, 2024), henceforth referred to as **CN**.

The timeline below provides an overview of the key milestones and actions taken throughout this process.



The objective of this joint report, and its underlying individual analyses, is shedding light on the gaps in the education-labor market connection on the Dutch Caribbean islands, by providing preliminary answers to the following two questions:

How do the current and future needs of the labor market of the Caribbean part of the Dutch Kingdom match the educational landscape of further education (SBO/MBO, HBO, WO) on the islands?

Which integrated approach can be applied that focuses on the cooperation between the labor market and education, taking the economic diversification and specific characteristics of the islands into account?

The answers to these two questions led to the following six main topics of this report:

Topics:

- I Optimize the cooperation and collaboration among government and educational organizations (local, inter-island and Dutch), and the labor market.**
- II Minimize labor shortages and skills gaps in strategic sectors on the islands.**
- III Establish robust systems to collect and manage high-quality data on education and the labor market.**
- IV Increase the relevance, attractiveness, and accessibility of vocational and tertiary education.**
- V Increase talent cultivation, transfer, retention, and recovery.**
- VI Make lifelong learning more attractive and accessible.**

These topics are explored in the upcoming sections of this report, based on the information included in the four individual labor market analyses. The summary provided in this report is not exhaustive, nor does it aim to replicate the scope or depth of any of the underlying analyses. The objective of this report is to provide a clear yet concise reflection of the essence of the underlying analyses, but also to inspire the reader to duly examine each individual analysis.

A careful review of the four individual labor market analyses shows that there are many similarities in the challenges faced by the six islands. All the islands face a significant shortage of data and research on both education and the labor market. Moreover, as Small Island Developments States (SIDS), the islands are limited by a lack of economies of scale, which has repercussions for the education system, the labor market, as well as the connection between these two.

For many years now, students from the islands have been seeking further education abroad. However, many opt to not return, contributing to brain drain and labor shortages in several critical sectors on the islands¹. Meanwhile, the islands' education systems continue to face strained financial and human resources, exacerbated by the lack of shared long-term visions and strategic planning. Improved communication and collaboration between governmental and educational institutions across the Dutch Kingdom is urgently needed, as current gaps hinder investments in education and efforts to align educational outcomes with labor market demands.

On the labor market side, shortages are compounded by the fact that a substantial portion of the workforce lacks the minimum qualifications or has a suboptimal educational background². Meanwhile, demographic shifts, including a declining youth cohort and aging of the population, pose further challenges for the number of students in the education systems, but also for the labor market in both the short and the long run. The growing share of the aged among the population means that in the next several years, large parts of the

¹ CN pages 9,26 ; SXM page 13.

² See Section IV for more details.

workforce may drop out due to retirement, increasing labor shortages, and causing the dependency ratio to rise.

The analyses of the labor markets on the six islands have made clear that reducing the gaps between education and the labor market cannot be realized in isolation or without considering broader factors. Socio-economic pressures, after all, affect all parts of society, not only education and the labor market.

The relatively high and steadily rising cost of living on the islands³, implies that large sections of the population are struggling to meet basic needs. Among those who are eligible to retire, several opt to continue working, simply out of necessity. Meanwhile, for the young, investing time and money in education might not be a priority nor an option, if basic needs are at risk. In a nutshell, financial strains may be limiting opportunities for professional development and upward mobility, perpetuating a cycle of underqualification, and hindering long-term socio-economic advancement.

Against this background, it is clear that the gaps in the connection between the labor market and education are best addressed in a holistic and integral manner, without losing sight of the specific characteristics and needs of each island. As revealed during the process of setting up this comprehensive labor market summary, there are not only many similarities, but also significant differences among the islands. Both the similarities and differences should be duly taken into account.

The BES islands (Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius) benefit from having a council dedicated to addressing labor market issues, although it faces its own challenges related to data collection and analysis. Establishing a similar organization on the other three islands would be beneficial, as it would provide clearer and consistent insights into labor market demand and facilitate more effective, data-driven decision-making to align workforce needs with local conditions.

Sections I to VI discuss the main topics of this report, which were derived from the four labor market analyses. Section VII provides further insight into the similarities as well as the differences between the six islands, complemented by the lessons that can be learned by all. Lastly, a conclusion is provided.

³ AUA page 13 ; CN page 18.

SECTION I

Optimize the cooperation and collaboration among government and educational organizations (local, inter-island and Dutch), and the labor market

All four labor market analyses emphasize that deficient cooperation between government organizations, educational institutions, and the labor market is a key factor contributing to the disconnection between education and employment on the islands⁴. Despite the willingness of most stakeholders to work together to improve this connection, many gaps continue to exist.

“The lack of collaboration and understanding between government entities, such as the Directorate of Labor, local employers, unions, schools, training colleges and Universities creates barriers to effective dialogue and cooperation.”

(AUA, page 6)

To optimize and streamline cooperation among stakeholders, it is recommended to establish a(semi)independent counseling organization on each island. This organization would function as a central hub for connecting all relevant parties. Its role would include the analysis of key challenges, which can be used to support decision-making within the Dutch Kingdom when developing policies and strategies.

Effective cooperation between Dutch ministries is also necessary to enhance collaboration with the islands. By improving coordination between the ministries, more streamlined and consistent support can be provided to the islands, ensuring that both educational and

labor market challenges are addressed in a more coherent and unified manner.

“The current alignment between Sint Maarten's education landscape and the labor market reveals a discordance. This misalignment is underscored by insights from the labor market assessments, which show a significant skills gap and a workforce that, though educated, often lacks the professional skills currently demanded by employers.”

(SXM, page 21)

The fact that all four labor market analyses include "increased cooperation" in their final recommendations⁵ underscores the critical importance of

cooperation to address the islands' educational and labor market challenges.

⁴ AUA page 6 ; SXM page 2 ; CUR pages 4,32 ; CN page 19.

⁵ AUA pages 29,30 ; CN pages 33,34 ; CUR page 24 ; SXM page 30.

SECTION II

Minimize labor shortages and skills gaps in strategic sectors on the islands

On all six islands, the sectors tourism and construction are among the most vital economic pillars. However, these sectors are experiencing significant labor shortages. Other key sectors such as healthcare, education, and government services also struggle to find qualified personnel. These shortages pose a threat to current and future welfare and socio-economic stability, as the inability to provide critical services can lead to, for example, suboptimal output and productivity, negative health outcomes, and increased healthcare costs.

“Three-quarters of the companies surveyed reported having trouble in finding qualified candidates to fill job vacancies over the past year.”
(AUA, page 22)

Demographic developments across all six islands are projected to exacerbate existing labor market pressures. Each island reports a rapidly aging population combined with a decline in the young, a trend referred to as "dejuvenating."⁶ This trend has already profoundly altered the islands' population structures, to the extent that the traditional population pyramids have transformed into urn-like shapes, with narrower bases and a bulkier middle. For example, in Sint Maarten, the percentage of the population aged 65 and older more than doubled between 2011 and 2022, from 5.3% to 12.8%. In Bonaire, this age group is expected to double by 2050, while in Curaçao, the average age of the population increased from 20 to nearly 46 years in the period 2011-2023.

“The ageing population leads to a structural shortage on the labor market, with increasing shortages in healthcare and education.”
(CN, page 20)

If no appropriate action is taken, the ongoing demographic shifts will lead to even greater demand for healthcare and senior welfare services—needs that the current healthcare systems already struggle to meet.

A crucial step in addressing labor shortage issues across all strategic sectors is upgrading education programs and making them more attractive to students. Another step is increasing the attractiveness and rewards of working in sectors that face labor shortages.

Digital skills gaps constitute an additional challenge on the islands, both now and in the future.⁷ The increasing digitalization of industries leads to growing demand for new skills, in fields like data engineering, data science and cybersecurity. These professions are particularly in demand in sectors such as government and healthcare.

⁶ AUA page 23 ; CUR page 7 ; SXM page 10 ; CN page 19.

⁷ CUR page 32 ; CN page 31 ; SXM pages 19,20.

“The educational system has to incorporate the skills that will be needed in the future, as soon as possible. Failure to do so will only lead to a bigger mismatch between the education system and the labor market.”

(CUR, page 32)

The analyses propose several recommendations to improve the 21st century skills set of the workforce and the population in general⁸. This includes upgrading, e.g., cognitive skills, soft skills, and digital skills⁹. To this effect, the stimulation of STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) is advised), as well as the establishment of a "Digital Caribbean Academy", and investments in training in the areas of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. By upgrading and

optimizing their digital infrastructures, and minimizing gaps in digital skills and other 21st century skills, the islands can strongly position themselves to face challenges proactively rather than reactively.

At present, many of the region's labor gaps are being filled by immigrants. While immigration has been providing temporary relief for labor shortages, it also leads to increases in the demand for housing, healthcare, and education. The challenges facing the education system are exacerbated when immigrants lack proficiency in the official languages¹⁰ used on each island. Language barriers in education can significantly affect students' performance, especially in subjects like STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), where clear communication of complex ideas is crucial. If students struggle with the language(s) of instruction, they may find it harder to grasp key concepts, follow lessons, or express their understanding, ultimately leading to poorer academic outcomes. This can particularly affect students who are learning in a language other than their first language.

In Bonaire, one in three residents was born outside the BES-CAS region, while in Aruba, over 17,000 Venezuelan refugees make up about one-sixth of the population. According to the UNHCR, Aruba has the highest ratio of refugees to local population worldwide. Stable socio-economic development and welfare on the islands cannot be achieved without proper migration planning and management.

“There is a pronounced trend towards importing skilled labor, reflecting the existing skills gap within the local workforce.”

(SXM, page 13)

⁸ CN page 31.

⁹ AUA pages 9,29 ; SXM pages 20,29 ; CN pages 29,34 ; CUR page 32.

¹⁰ SXM page 24 ; CN page 26.

SECTION III

Establish robust systems to collect and manage high-quality data on education and the labor market

An important bottleneck that contributes to the gaps in the connection between education and the labor market is the lack of (high-quality) data. Authorities on the islands often lack comprehensive labor market data, hindering informed policy-making and decision-making processes. The absence of unified data gathering and management systems also hinders efficient data sharing and collaboration with non-public services and institutions, and individuals who may require information about the labor market or education.

The need for more and better data on both the labor market and education was stressed upon in all four labor market analyses. All 6 islands face similar challenges: on the one hand, there is a vast number of reports and articles on both topics, but on the other hand, there are serious limitations to the quality, validity, and accessibility of relevant numerical data on the labor market and education.¹¹

In the Caribbean Netherlands, there is insufficient data on labor migration patterns, particularly regarding individuals with a Dutch passport. This data gap makes it difficult to fully grasp the impact of migration on the labor market, and to develop effective policies, especially those that may target issues like poverty and social inclusion.

Continuous collection and analysis of high-quality data is crucial for the monitoring of labor market trends, and ensuring that policies are timely executed. Regular data updates are also essential to navigate economic changes effectively. Although their proposed approach to remedy data constraints differ,¹² most of the labor market analyses call for the establishment of a centralized data collection and management. In addition, they stress the importance of more research on key education and labor market developments, and consistent and reliable indicators. The following needs were highlighted:

- A central registry of vacancies per island, and data on the (lack of) matches between education and the local work population.
- Surveys on labor market needs (current and future).
- The size of the NEET population (people aged 15 to 29, who are not in employment, education, or training).
- Comparisons between governmental projects and plans, and the types of labor required versus the educational options, both local and in the region.

“Relevant authorities often find it challenging to access clear and comprehensive information as a basis for policy development that provides insight into the alignment between available jobs and labor demand. This perceived lack of transparency and data availability makes it difficult for individuals and organizations to make informed decisions about matters relating to the labor force and for authorities to develop effective policies. Improving the accessibility and transparency of labor market information is essential for better job matching and capacity planning.” (AUA, page 5)

¹¹ CUR pages 4,12 ; CN page 12 ; SXM pages 2,23 ; AUA pages 5,10.

¹² SXM page 27 ; CN page 33 ; CUR page 35 ; AUA page 29.

SECTION IV

Increase the relevance, attractiveness, and accessibility of vocational and tertiary education

One of the major challenges the islands face is the lack of economies of scale, which results in a limited offering of vocational and tertiary educational programs and courses.¹³ An additional challenge is that certain vocational professions and sectors suffer from a negative image or negative perceptions about the work involved, which leads to relatively low enrollment levels among students.¹⁴ As a result, many students leave the islands yearly to pursue further education abroad, contributing to brain drain, and persistent labor shortages in several key professions and sectors on the islands.¹⁵

The image students have of certain sectors is often shaped by the fact that primary and secondary employment conditions are suboptimal in some industries. Additionally, these sectors are not always formally organized and often lack collective labor agreements (CAOs). Addressing these issues is therefore crucial to improve the connection between education and the labor market.

Research reveals that a large section of the population on the islands does not have a starting qualification, or has a suboptimal education level.¹⁶ Employers also report that labor market pressures are compounded by the difficulty in finding candidates that meet their requirements in terms of practical and soft skills, even if they have a fitting educational background. Consequently, the challenges related to vocational and tertiary education are not only quantitative, but often also qualitative.

“The Caribbean Netherlands shows alarmingly high percentages of the working population without a starting qualification, with 51% on Bonaire, 31% on Saba and 62% on Sint Eustatius.” (CN, page 3)

“Most Dutch nationals in Sint Maarten, like the wider population, have reached secondary school as their highest educational milestone. Yet, it is interesting to see that a higher fraction—7% more—of Dutch nationals hold tertiary qualifications compared to the general population.” (SXM, page 15)

Against this background, it is of the utmost importance to increase the relevance and attractiveness of strategic vocational and tertiary education programs in a timely and integral manner. One crucial part of this process is the updating and upgrading of programs and courses, and providing students with sufficient guidance and instructions to prepare them for when they join the labor market. Both students and employers stand to benefit from proper on-the-job training, as this will help smoothen the transition onto the labor market. Moreover, it is imperative that general accessibility to these educational offerings is guaranteed, as that is currently not always the case for all studies.¹⁷

¹³ CN pages 8,16 ; SXM page 15.

¹⁴ CUR page 29 ; CN pages 3,21.

¹⁵ CN pages 3,9.

¹⁶ CUR pages 23,34 ; CN pages 10,11 ; SXM pages 8,13,18, 24.

¹⁷ AUA pages 5,6.

Addressing the noted challenges on the six islands requires the alignment of educational curricula with market needs, and the strengthening and upgrading of vocational and practical learning programs, aimed at creating a multi-skilled and adaptable workforce that is ready for the increasing demands of the 21st century labor market.



“.....continued reliance on foreign labor indicates possible challenges within the local education and training systems to meet the labor market's demands and highlights the potential for brain drain, where local talent seeks opportunities elsewhere due to a lack of suitable employment at home.” (SXM, page 15)

“.....automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are profoundly changing the job landscape. While these developments create new opportunities, they are particularly accessible to highly educated individuals.” (AUA, page 27)

“Certain sectors have an image problem, which makes them less attractive to local people to work in them.” (CN, page 3)

“The low pay, unattractive benefits, and dismal professional growth prospects offered in certain private sector branches and jobs are also thought to play a role in students avoiding them, despite the shortages on the labor market.” (CUR, page 29)

SECTION V

Increase talent cultivation, transfer, retention, and recovery

All four labor market analyses identify brain drain, population aging, and labor market gaps as significant challenges. Achieving sustainable economic development and welfare on each island, as well as in the region as a whole, heavily depends on the capacity to transfer, retain, attract, and cultivate these talents.

Currently, several factors contribute to a talent shortage in the region¹⁸.

- The aged, which comprise a large share of the population, are approaching retirement, and will be taking their knowledge and experience with them upon leaving the workforce.
- The limited availability of vocational or tertiary education within the region often leads to students going abroad to study, and many are not returning.
- Certain professions are in high demand, but there is a lack of local companies that are willing and able to provide high-quality training, and to supervise students during their internships.
- Key positions in important sectors are often filled by temporary workers, resulting in the loss of knowledge and talent when these individuals leave. This “borrowed” knowledge does not generate long-term growth within the region.
- Local talent often seeks employment opportunities elsewhere due to a lack of suitable employment options locally or within the region. Primary and secondary employment conditions also play a role in this context.
- Local students who complete their education abroad encounter challenges upon returning, such as high relocation costs and student debt burdens, a shortage of attractive job opportunities, a perception of being “outsiders,” and conflicts between traditional and modern management practices, among other barriers.

In small multicultural societies with a diverse student population, it is not uncommon for some students to pursue their studies elsewhere, with a portion of them eventually settling outside their home island or region. However, data on this phenomenon is limited, and there are few initiatives aimed at encouraging students to return to their home island or region after completing their studies. Additionally, for those who do wish to return, local salary levels often do not meet the financial demands of repaying student loans or covering the costs associated with higher education, further discouraging their return.

The analyses propose several recommendations¹⁹:

- Implement policies designed to retain knowledge and promote the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.
- Enhance the attractiveness of vocational education for both current and upcoming generation of students.
- Conduct comprehensive research to better understand the underlying causes of brain drain.
- Enact policies that facilitate the return of (young) professionals to the islands, such as partially or fully subsidizing study loan repayments, offering tax incentives for returning individuals or companies that employ them, and providing assistance with housing.

¹⁸ CN pages 16,22,28 ; AUA pages 23,26 ; SXM pages13,28 ; CUR pages 29,31,32.

¹⁹ CUR page 35 ; SXM page 28 ; AUA page 29 ; CN pages 33,34.

- Strengthen regional educational opportunities, including the provision of adequate student housing.

To secure the future the islands and region deserve, it is essential not only to cultivate the talent needed but also to encourage the current workforce to exceed minimum qualification levels. Additionally, efforts must be made to protect and further develop the talent already present.



“Not developing skills that are considered crucial on the labor market, may lead to many (relative) disadvantages for the NEET youth –people aged 15-29 not in employment, education, or training– later on in life. Reducing the number of NEET youth is therefore crucial, not only for the young, but also for their country’s economic growth prospects.”
(CUR, page 14)

SECTION VI

Make lifelong learning more attractive and accessible

Lifelong learning is a necessity across all six islands, in order to develop a skilled and competitive workforce.

For a long time now, tourism has been the largest economic sector on most of the islands. Unsurprisingly, five of the six islands emphasize the need for economic diversification, indicating an awareness of the need to explore other potential sources of income. The COVID pandemic made it clear that (over)reliance on tourism can have far-reaching negative social, financial, and macroeconomic implications that require many years to recover from.

However, the islands also acknowledge a lack of the necessary knowledge, skills, and know-how within the current local governance structure and labor force to successfully realize alternative sources of income. The development of new and sustainable revenue streams requires a clear vision and strategic multi-annual planning by the government, in collaboration with other stakeholders, including those that are part of the education system and the labor market. Moreover, the existing workforce also has to have access to knowledge, skills, and resources, in order to utilize any new opportunities that arise.

The fact that employers often struggle to find qualified candidates shows that the approach towards learning and professional development on the islands has room for improvement. This is particularly important given that a large portion of the workforce does not meet the minimum qualification standards, or has a suboptimal education level.

“Taking into account the pace at which technological advancements are transforming various industries, research should be undertaken to develop and promote programs for lifelong learning that assist persons within the labor force in building and gaining new skills.”
(SXM, page 31)

In this context, BBL (Beroeps Begeleidende Leerweg) programs, which combine work and study, play a crucial role in upskilling the workforce. Additionally, subsidies for practical learning are vital to support these initiatives. Digitalization, technological advancements, and safety and environmental laws require certain shifts in the private and public sectors of each island. New skills and knowledge are increasingly expected from all generations in and outside the workforce²⁰.

For professions in sectors such as health care, education, and childcare, continuous learning has become mandatory on islands like Bonaire, Saba, and Statia²¹. Meanwhile, in other sectors like construction and hospitality, this is not the case yet.²² In the latter sectors the possibility for professional growth and specialization is very much needed yet not facilitated enough by companies and educational institutes.

²⁰ AUA pages 27,28 ; CUR pages 31,36 ; SXM pages 2,18,19,26 ; CN pages 3,17,22,24.

²¹ CN pages 24,28.

²² CN page 11 ; SXM pages 6,13 ; AUA page 28.

Also, the diversity of the population brings forth that there is a “comprehension” gap to bridge before the professional acquirements can be met²³. This is where lifelong learning and its accessibility can create opportunities to fulfill the needs of the labor market.

The recommendations from the analyses are:

Facilitate educational initiatives that promote lifelong learning, and create opportunities to upskill and reskill employees, in alignment with labor market requirements and transitions.²⁴ These initiatives are designed to create opportunities for individuals to upskill and reskill, ensuring that they remain competitive as labor market conditions evolve.

Stimulate lifelong development through initiatives that stimulate employers to actively support and facilitate Beroeps Begeleidende Leerweg (BBL) courses.²⁵ These work-based learning pathways provide a valuable mechanism for employees to enhance their qualifications and employability, thus addressing both immediate and long-term labor market needs.

Offer more flexible/ modular education to increase participation.²⁶ To increase educational participation, the introduction of more flexible and modular education options is advised. By offering adaptable learning formats, educational institutions can cater to a wider range of learners, making it easier for individuals to engage in continued learning at various stages of their careers.

Explore whether the digital Caribbean Academy or similar initiatives are feasible.²⁷ This academy would focus on building digital competencies and integrating cutting-edge technology into the region’s educational framework, thereby equipping students with the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digitalized economy.

“Promote lifelong learning initiatives through formal and informal education to ensure continuous skill development.”

“Ensure educational programs are accessible to all demographic groups, including older individuals, people with disabilities, and underserved communities.”

(AUA, page 30)

²³ AUA pages 23,26 ; CUR pages 29,31,32 ; SXM pages 19,21,24 ; CN pages 16,22,28,32.

²⁴ AUA page 30 ; CUR page 35 ; SXM pages 25,26 ; CN pages 33,34.

²⁵ AUA page 30 ; SXM pages 27,30 ; CN page 34.

²⁶ AUA page 30 ; SXM page 25 ; CN pages 33,34.

²⁷ CN page 34.

SECTION VII

Similarities, differences and learning opportunities

This section zooms in on the similarities and differences between the six islands, followed by an overview of what the islands have indicated that they think they can learn from each other.

Given the islands' common historical background and geographical location, it is not surprising that the islands have many similarities. However, although all four labor market analyses are aimed at achieving a better alignment between education and the needs of the labor market, the approach suggested by each to achieve this objective is somewhat different. After all, each island requires a tailored approach to effectively align its education system with the demands of its own labor market. It is imperative to keep this in mind when analyzing and dealing with the six islands.

Similarities between the islands

Common challenges highlighted by all the six islands include poor communication among organizations across the Dutch Kingdom, education and labor market data deficiencies, skills gaps, brain drain, population aging and dejuvenating, and the need to keep up with technological advancements. The islands also stress the urgency of investment in education, and promoting lifelong learning as possible solutions to help improve the alignment between education and the labor market.

Lacking Stakeholder Collaboration: All the islands emphasize the importance of collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, employers, and other stakeholders in addressing labor market challenges. There is a common need for better communication and collaboration between stakeholders to align education and labor market needs effectively, and create a more resilient workforce.

Data Challenges: The six islands face significant challenges related to labor market data. These challenges include limited data accessibility and clarity, insufficient data on labor migration patterns, lack of reliable data for decision-making, and the absence of centralized data collection and management systems. These data gaps make it difficult for policymakers and stakeholders to effectively analyze labor market trends, identify skills gaps, and develop timely and appropriate policies and interventions.

Education and Labor Market Alignment: The islands recognize the crucial need to align their education systems with the demands of their respective labor markets. Their analyses highlight a common concern regarding skills gaps and the need to equip their workforce with the necessary skills and qualifications to meet evolving industry demands.

Focus on Skills Development: Recognizing the rapidly changing nature of work, all six islands highlight the need to prioritize skills development initiatives. This includes a focus on enhancing digital literacy, promoting STEM education, and providing lifelong learning opportunities to ensure a workforce adaptable to technological advancements and evolving industry demands.

Tourism Reliance and Economic Diversification: On all six islands, tourism is a major economic pillar. The islands rely largely on tourism while grappling with the need for economic diversification, proper migration planning and management, and sustainable environmental practices.

General differences between the islands

- Hurricanes are much more of a threat to Sint Maarten²⁸, Saba and Sint Eustatius than to Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire. This means that those 3 islands need professionals to both attend emergencies caused by hurricanes, but also the expertise to strengthen their economies and build infrastructure that is better able to cope with these natural disasters.
- Aruba already was already facing a refugee problem due the situation in Venezuela²⁹. The recent election in this country has generated an even worst situation, which increases the potential of more people fleeing the nation. This leads to a future scenario where a large portion of the island's population are not Dutch-born nationality and therefore, will rely heavily on the local infrastructures for education and training. Part of that refugee wave will also put pressure on Curacao and Bonaire.
- The oil terminal in Sint Eustatius³⁰ is a key part of the economy, but is also at risk of bankruptcy. If the terminal shuts down, the impact on the island's economy will be severe.
- Also, in Sint Eustatius³¹ 40% of the employees of the Public Body are expected to retire within 10 years. This clearly compromises the ability of the local government to function properly, and jeopardizes its ability to lead the island's development.
- The small scale of Saba, in and on itself, poses several challenges. For example,³² most of the health care personnel on Saba is not Saban, and it is very hard for them to advance in their career if they stay on the island.
- Sint Maarten has a shared, open border with Saint-Martin (France) in which different governing systems and different languages of instruction may hinder cooperation and allow for abuse of certain governing structures. For example, while the Dutch side of Sint Maarten has limited policy related to refugees, the French side operates under refugee laws of France, inadvertently creating an entry point for refugees into the Dutch side's economy.

Differences in approaching the education-labor market disconnection

In Aruba's labor market analysis, the focus is on increasing the resiliency and robustness its workforce, and the inclusion of diverse groups. This is expected to not only help to reduce the gaps in connection between education and the labor market, but also strengthen the island's economy. Against this background, Aruba's analysis includes recommendations aimed at integrating technology into education, increasing knowledge transfer, retaining older workers, bridging skills gaps in high-demand sectors, as well as the adoption of flexible and inclusive labor policies.

²⁸ SXM page 2.

²⁹ AUA page 12.

³⁰ CN page 12.

³¹ CN page 22.

³² CN page 17.

The labor market analysis of the Caribbean Netherlands stresses on meeting labor market needs through suitable solutions in education, particularly given the multicultural and multilingual context of Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius. The suggested solutions in the area of education include online and hybrid learning, empowering young residents, promoting collective labor agreements, enhancing labor mobility, as well as digitization. Other suggested solutions involve improving data collection, language and soft skills development, and incentivizing the return of skilled workers.

The Caribbean Netherlands's analysis also focuses on the lack of basic qualifications among many workers and calls for sustainable solutions to poverty, which it sees as contributing to the problem.

In Curaçao's labor market analysis, the fact that the sectors with highest labor shortages also face high unemployment rates, was largely attributed to a mismatch between the workforce's skills and labor market demands. The analysis highlights that the strengths inherent to the population's multilingual and multicultural population are barely taken into account when policies and interventions related to education and/or the labor market are formulated. As a result, the potential and talents of the Curaçao youth do not get optimally utilized. Against this background, programs leveraging the island's multilingual and multicultural population are recommended, as well as a multi-annual vision and strategy, in which cooperation and collaboration are key.

Sint Maarten's labor market stresses the importance of education reform to equip the workforce with the skills needed for a changing job market. However, studies have been unable to document the exact skills lacking, underscoring the need for established and open channels of communication. The analysis also underscores the necessity of aligning Sint Maarten's internationally influenced education system with the country's specific socio-economic needs. Other recommendations include enhancing vocational training, STEM education, lifelong learning, addressing "brain drain", and promoting digital literacy, aimed at creating a strong workforce that is able to thrive notwithstanding rapid technological advancements.

Learning opportunities

There are several areas in which the islands have identified opportunities to learn from each other. These include, how to adapt to demographic challenges, different approaches to address the disconnect between education and labor market demands, how to approach proactive policy development, how to build resilience against external threats, and how to stay on top of technological advancements and innovation.

These learning opportunities revolve largely around sharing best practices, and establishing collaborative initiatives related to areas of common interest and issues. By working together, the six islands can become stronger and better prepared to handle current, as well as future challenges.

Demographic Challenges

- What we can learn: Investing in strategies to retain talent on the island and shift the focus to "brain gain."

- By developing joint strategies, such as flexible pension systems, work programs, and lifelong learning initiatives for older adults, these islands can more effectively manage the impact of an aging population.

Labor Market and Education

- What we can learn: Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten, can tap into the ample experience and expertise of ROA CN, the Council for Education and Labor Market of the Caribbean Netherlands. The council was established in September 2011 and has the statutory task (in accordance with the BES Vocational Education Act) to advise the Minister of Education, Culture and Science about the training courses in the Caribbean Netherlands.
- The other islands can also learn from the achievements of Curaçao's ROA, although it is not an independent council, like ROA CN.
- Aruba and Curaçao can benefit from Sint Maarten's insights by paying more attention to revaluing and strengthening vocational education as a legitimate career path.

Proactive Policy Development

- What we can learn: Collaboration between all territories in data collection and analysis can improve policy making. For example, all regions can benefit from joint research and shared data to better understand labor market trends and make more informed policy choices.

Resilience against External Threats

- What we can learn: Other territories can learn from Sint Maarten's experience in building resilience against natural disasters by implementing disaster plans and recovery measures to protect the economy and labor market.

Technological Advancement and Innovation

- What we can learn: These regions can work together on technology initiatives, such as establishing shared innovation centers or promoting digital skills training that aligns with international trends and strengthens the regional labor market.

CONCLUSION

The Joint Labor Market Analysis underscores the importance of adopting a collaborative, data-driven, and strategic approach to bridge the gap between education and employment across the Dutch Caribbean islands. Establishing a (semi)independent counseling organization to oversee the alignment of education and the labor market on each island, coupled with enhanced cooperation and a focus on long-term strategic planning, is essential to effectively address prevailing labor shortages and demographic challenges. Moreover, by working together, the islands' counseling organizations can reap ample benefits from the creation of economies of scale, learning from each other, and supporting each other when needed.

Investing in vocational education, higher education, lifelong learning, and initiatives aimed at retaining local talent is crucial for promoting sustainable socio-economic development and improving the quality of life for all residents. A key component in achieving this progress is ensuring that the workforce attains qualifications above the minimum level. For instance, the promotion of Beroeps Begeleidende Leerweg (BBL) pathways offers opportunities for the current and future labor force to exceed basic MBO-level qualifications, thereby enhancing employability and strengthening the resilience of the regional economy.

Curriculum development at educational institutions should be directed towards bridging the gap between education and the labor market, ensuring that supply and demand are better aligned. Furthermore, ensuring the academic success of Caribbean students must remain a priority, as this is foundational to broader socio-economic improvement across the region.

The report also highlights the willingness of all six islands to take the lead in research efforts aimed at understanding and addressing these challenges. These efforts would be significantly strengthened if all stakeholders agree on a structured framework for future reports, focusing on common metrics such as youth unemployment rates, NEET indicators, and other relevant data. Such consistency would not only provide a clearer understanding of regional challenges but also enable more targeted and effective policy responses.

To guide prioritization, the following criteria should be applied: necessity, concreteness, and feasibility (based on previous experiences). Based on these criteria, the following strategies are recommended, in no particular order of importance:

- **Improving the quality of the educational journey**
- **Establishing a (semi) independent education and labor market council for each island**
- **Expanding BBL (vocational pathways)**
- **Providing ongoing training for the workforce**
- **Enhancing data collection and analysis**

This prioritization is grounded in the practical application of these recommendations across the Dutch Caribbean islands and reflects the region's urgent need for progress.

The current situation calls for swift and decisive action. Without coordinated efforts, the region risks continuing to navigate blindly, approaching the rocky shores of future uncertainty. The stakes are high, and it is essential that stakeholders across the Dutch Kingdom collaborate effectively to turn this uncertain future into a promise of prosperity for the entire Dutch Caribbean region.

Everything is interconnected, which raises a fundamental question: where should efforts begin? The analyses suggest that the starting point to make education more relevant and valuable for all parties involved is optimizing the collaboration between the labor market, educational institutions, and the government. A specific example in the area of vocational education is making BBL more attractive for both students and companies.

At the academic level, a gap year focused on addressing the alignment between the European Netherlands and the Caribbean region is also recommended, though this alone will not close the gap, as language remains a persistent barrier.

Additionally, an innovative approach would be to focus not only on the demand side of the labor market but also on the supply side. What do students themselves want? Incorporating entrepreneurial skills into the curriculum could foster innovation and create new job opportunities. By aligning educational outcomes with students' ambitions and needs, this approach could stimulate economic growth while addressing both immediate labor market demands and long-term regional development goals.

APPENDIX

Recommendations in one overview

SECTION I

1. Cooperation between educational and government institutions (local, inter-island, and Dutch), and the labor market
2. Cooperation between Dutch ministries
3. A (semi) independent education and labor market council on/for each island (ROA)

SECTION II

4. Improve the quality of education
5. Digital literacy, cognitive competencies, and soft skills: Digital Caribbean Academy, AI, STEM education, etc.

SECTION III

6. Robust systems to collect and manage high-quality data, and a central vacancy registry
7. Research on developments in education and the labor market, to obtain key indicators

SECTION IV

8. Update educational programs and courses
9. Career guidance
10. Accessible education
11. Align curricula with the demands of the labor market

SECTION V

12. Intergenerational knowledge transfer
13. Improve the attractiveness of vocational education for young people
14. Research on brain drain
15. Facilities for regional exchange, e.g., through housing assistance
16. Facilities for the return of graduates, particularly from the Netherlands

SECTION VI

17. BBL (work-based learning)
18. Lifelong learning (LLL)
19. Training for workers (target group not explicitly mentioned)
20. Modular education
21. Digital Caribbean Academy (see also II)

SECTION VII

22. Overview of employment effects of government projects
23. Labor market surveys