

## The University of Guyana: Challenge and Change

**University of Guyana Vice Chancellor Professor Ivelaw Griffith talks with The Guyana Review about the challenges that inhere in the transformation of the University of Guyana**

**Guyana Review:** Perhaps we can start by trying to secure an insight into your vision, your priorities for the University of Guyana. Where do you want to take the institution?

**Vice Chancellor:** Our University has suffered from the breadth and depth of neglect so I do not have the luxury of having one priority at a time. I have to have a bunch of priorities at a time. Part of what we need to do is to examine our programmatic offerings. Are we doing the instruction and the research that a Guyana going into the future would need? Do we have the human capital support and the physical capital support to do quality work for our students and staff? Those are some of the problems. We have to do something about staff salaries; we have to do something about the physical infrastructure, classrooms; we have to do something about technology. Those are all priorities. So, for me, it is a matrix with several priority elements. Some have to do with academic quality enhancement, some have to do with physical infrastructure, some have to do with human capital, some have to do with funding. Part of what any University fifty-five years old has to do – and this University will be fifty-five years old this November - is to diversify its funding. That is one priority that I am pursuing.

**GR:** Do you want to tell us, Vice Chancellor, a bit about the directions in which you are looking for funding.

**VC:** Yes. Right now the main sources of income for funding are government subvention and tuition fees. We have to enhance both but we have to ask where else might we get funding, where else might we get revenue? We are reaching out to Alumni, We are engaging in merchandising; so less than a year from now, when you visit my office, you will be able to buy somewhere on this campus, UG T - shirts, UG mugs, UG hats, UG umbrellas. Merchandising, in our view, needs to become part of that broad University base.

This University needs to get back on track - a research track; a University for the Medical School; a University for Environmental Science, for Technology and for Engineering. We need to have funding for research grants. Yes, we have to ask for more money from the government and this year I got 19.3 % increase over last year. That is still not enough, but it is still something more. Yes, we have to get more from tuition. Tuition fees are low. Recently, the Council approved an increase in tuition fees for continuing students - 15%, 10%, and 10% over the following three academic years, 2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020, respectively; so we have to augment tuition fees. We have to augment government's subvention and we also have to embrace Alumni. How can we embrace the corporate sector? What can we do with merchandizing? Most Universities make a big deal out of Sport as a means of generating revenue. We will have to go there.



**Professor Ivelaw Griffith**

**GR:** .....these are all new areas into which the University is venturing?

**VC:** Many things are new. I have a Vice Chancellery for Philanthropy. Some of what we are experiencing is new to the University, new to Guyana. Guyana does not have a culture of philanthropy in education. We have come out of a system where we expect government to pay for the University. So here I am saying - as thousands of University across the world do – that we have to say to people, individuals, companies, groups, organizations... ..how might you pay forward with a scholarship? How might I do in the naming of a building? How I might do in the naming of a professorship, in enabling the University to augment its resources. That is standard practice in many parts of the world, but it is not in the domain of what Guyana is accustomed to. So we have to teach the University and the rest of the society.

Some of what I am recommending is not new. It's just that we have not been doing it in Guyana. We have to begin to ask ourselves, for example, what might we offer as new degrees? What might we offer as short courses? Some people do not need a degree or diploma but a three - week course or a three-day course focusing on X or Y. So those are our engagements to augment the University both in terms of programme offerings and revenue base.

We have to ensure, over time, that we can significantly rely on revenue from government and from tuition. They are always going to be there, but we want to broaden the base, we want to broaden the pie.

**GR:** We want to stay with funding but to place into the context of local business community. I am aware of a number of graduates who are working with local businesses..... in other words this University has a track record of giving to the business community. What are your views on reciprocity?

**VC:** Reciprocity is important. It would, however, be a journey to get the business to fully accept giving. We have had the misfortune in Guyana for more than a decade of neglect of the University which has led to a decline in the quality of the output, so that people in the industry and the business community have not been fully 'thumbs up' with some of what we put out. It is not comforting for a Vice Chancellor to say, but there are issues with what we have been putting out. We have to give them a reason and the confidence that when they give they will see changed output. We have to give them an opportunity to invest in the design of the programmes. When I brought in a team to do a feasibility study for the **School of Entrepreneurship** they were people from the business community. When the team began to do its work they went out and sought their views. When the Drafting Board was completed we did an outreach..... Corriverton, Linden, Anna Regina and a few sessions in Georgetown. We have to have them from the word go rather than just ask them for money and things. We have to change

our strategy of engaging with the business community, the civil community.

As of July last year I started some talks – **The Turkeyen and Tain Talks**. Every one of those programmes has a co sponsor or a set of co sponsors. I am saying to the business community "you be part of us." So when we had the one on economic and financial policy Guyoil was there, when we had the Distinguished Lecture Series for Ulric Trotz, CGX was there, IAST was there. When we had the Renaissance Lectures where we established The University of Guyana Press, Fly Jamaica was there, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was there. So we have to build partnerships. We have crafted a partnership with The Giftland Group of Companies. So, yes, we have to reach out but we have to be mindful that we have had a certain negativity. Some of the people we have put out have not been stellar in their performances. That is the reality. Part of what we need to do is to say to them "you help us build it back." But that is not an event it is a journey. We have to be inclusive and let them understand that they must have a voice commenting on what we do and what we will do differently. That that is a journey.

# The University of Guyana: Challenge and Change

## From page 1

**GR:** Are you finding that the business community is receptive to the University's overtures?

**VC:** Oh yes! It is part of what I have been preaching. Some of what I say will make people uncomfortable but if you do not face it you cannot fix it. We have issues here. Some of them are related to the political environment and some have to do with the fact that the University has not always done justice to its students. I am candid with business community. I am candid with the Union. They do not like to hear that. I am candid with the students, candid because it is a shared problem. I am saying let's do some things differently; let us talk about some different things but let's also talk about the problem we have. Pretending that we do not have a problem is not enough. I have been here eight and half months and I am very proud of the fact that we have been able to get the support of the government, the business support, with civil society organizations as well as Guyanese and non-Guyanese in diaspora. For example, Dr. Terrence Blackman (Dean of Science, Health and Technology, Medgar Evers College, City University of New York) is currently in Guyana for our inaugural Undergraduate Research Conference. On Wednesday and Thursday, Dr. Blackman will deliver the keynote address at Turkeyen and Tain, respectively. We have to get students to do research, to showcase research.

**GR:** You made a brief comment earlier on problems at the University as it relates to politics. One of the things we have witnessed is the dead hand politics on the University. Would you talk a bit about that?

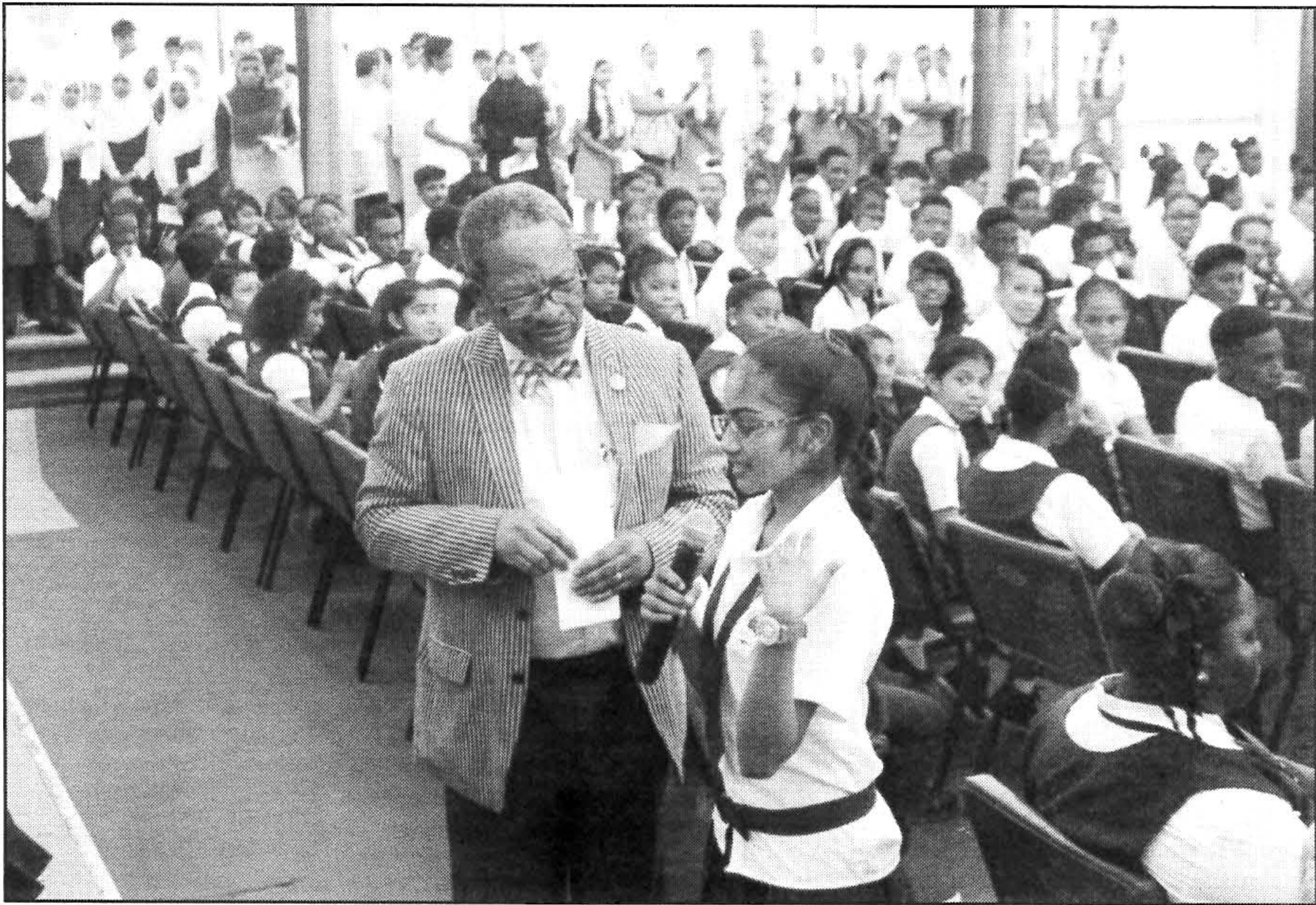
**VC:** Let me answer that in two ways. I have had the opportunity for the thirty- six years that I have been away from Guyana to operate within the United States and as a consultant to several universities many of which are public universities, whether in the United States of America, the Caribbean, Latin America or Europe. There is a cardinal rule that the intrusion of politics into the affairs of the university is not good for the university; it is not good for society. The fact that you are a state university does not mean that the university should be dictated to politically. Guyana has had the misfortune and that happened for a long time under different governments. My point is that if this nation wants a different academic dispensation it has got to abide by that cardinal rule and I have made it quite clear that I am not going to be a Vice Chancellor that facilitates that internal political dictation - who to hire, who to fire, what student to admit, what to publish. The University must be a place, a neutral ground for all places, critical of government, critical of opposition. We will not do ourselves any justice of the nation if we allow our only university to become hostage to politics. I understand the political environment and I will not allow that to happen. The creditability that we are trying to restore as a research enterprise and a respected institution within the Caribbean and beyond is at stake.

**GR:** Do you think you have made that point where it should be made?

**VC:** Yes, and I do not want to have to make it anymore

**GR:** You have been speaking about the diaspora. Tell us about your initiative to embrace the diaspora?

**VC:** Let me tell you the why first and then tell you about the response. The reality for Guyana is that we have a phenomenon of flight of human capital. Much of Guyana's brain power is out of Guyana and the harsh reality is that the rebuilding of any entity in Guyana, whether it is university education or the health sector, requires tapping people who are in the diaspora, who have a passion for the nation, who want to find a way to help. Not everyone, like me or Dr Yaw and others, are planning to come back and live in Guyana. They would, however, like to contribute. I have a very extensive network largely in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe. I have been calling on that network, I brought forty- five of my friends from the United States, the Caribbean and Canada last year and it was not only about getting money



Vice Chancellor Griffith engaging secondary school students

from them. For example, Dr. Blackman is not giving us money but his institution is funding his being here. I am not paying his hotel bill. He is living in the family home. I am not paying him a honorarium.

We put out a monthly newsletter... **Renaissance**. You will see it says **Public Relations Department University of Guyana**. It is being managed by someone in the diaspora, in New York. So there are a number of things that we benefit from... time from some people... and some of them did not graduate from this university. Dr Blackman did not graduate from this university, the person who is managing that newsletter data base did not graduate here but they are Guyanese and they are friends of mine who want to find a way to contribute. Each of those forty - five who came paid their own way. I said to them "I do not have money to pay you, but I will find house for you, I will find accommodation for you." Some of them said "VC I know you are strapped for money so I will pay my own hotel accommodation or I will stay at family." So we know the necessity of the diaspora engagement, we know the value economically and the size of the Guyana diaspora in North America, Canada and Europe.

This July, we are having the Diaspora Conference. We are asking Guyanese and others to come for a week. I will tell you what that week will be. We will meet with local folk and talk about the business of giving back to Guyana, not only to the University.

On Day One we will have a welcome; On Days Two and Three we will have conversation with businessmen, government officials. I have invited the President. He will deliver the keynote address. I have reached out to Mr Jadgeo to come and give a speech.

This Guyanese diaspora is not a politically partisan diaspora. I intend to reach out to all races, all political parties, all persuasions. We are going to spend part of that week in giving back. We are going to provide five or six areas. If you are a medical doctor here are a couple of places you can serve; if you are a teacher here are a couple of places you can go and serve; for social workers there are some areas. This is what we call giving back market.

It took me 33 years being away before I went to Kaieteur when I came for a visit in 2013. Many Guyanese in the diaspora do not know their country; so we are saying that when you come home go to a place that you have never been to before.....a place like Iwokrama, Kaieteur of the Arrow Point Nature Resort.

On the final day of the week, there will be my investi-

ture as Vice Chancellor. That will be a ceremonial event. On the Friday evening we will have a cultural extravaganza. We have invited a very distinguished Guyanese national icon, Keith Waite.

This University has not had an artist in residence since Martin Carter. I intend to support the arts. I am using my home as a gallery. There are students' and lecturers' paintings, music and poetry. I want to end the week showcasing local talent. We are going to bring musical talent from the diaspora. We are going to have music and dance done by the Machusi Singers. We already have them. There is a distinguished Guyanese musician and entrepreneur whom I met in Ghana last year. We are bringing him in. We are going to bring a contingent from New York. I want to be able to offer an appreciation of some of the cultural arts to Guyanese in the diaspora, a week of varying kind of events. One of the things we are going to do in that week is to establish a **Centre for Diaspora Education**. We are also going to establish a talent data base. Who are the medical doctors? Who are the nurses? Who are the accountants? Might their skills be available here for a week or a month? Right now there is no structured way of knowing who in the diaspora has what skills and wants to give back. We are going to the Caribbean Development Bank for support in that project. We are talking to them about that and about the **University of Guyana Press**.

The idea is that the engagement with the diaspora is necessary. I am not interested in the political dynamics. I am bringing everyone. There is a role for everyone, whether race, politics or geography.

**GR:** There is the human capital limitation.....

**VC:** Part of what we are struggling with is that very human capital limitation and part of what is going to be necessary is for us to augment the salaries that we pay. This University does not have a Lawyer. A University that is 55 years old must have its own Attorney. We have to look to the diaspora to see who in the diaspora is willing to come back and make some sacrifice because the human capital, locally, is not there. Tapping into the diaspora is required to fill some of the skills that we need. We are looking for a Civil Engineer and we have difficulties finding one. We are looking for a Chief Accountant and we have difficulties finding one. If you were to go to the University of the West Indies that is where you are going

Turn to page 3

# The University of Guyana: Challenge and Change

From page 2

to find some of the best Guyanese in almost every field. Many of them were right here but we could not keep them because of the salaries.

One of the things that I did early this year, in January, was to set up a Vice Chancellor's fund to support research. You want people to do research you have to find a way to support them. Part of the enhancement of the image of the University is by research and by signing the agreement for the **University of Guyana Press** we are seeking to motivate students to do research

**GR:** Have you got a time frame for bringing that on-stream?

**VC:** Yes! Two days after the signing I had a breakfast meeting at my home to discuss the first - year work programme. I have in place a Chairman of the Editorial Board. We identified names of people who will constitute that Editorial Board. The actual production will be done by Randall in Jamaica and marketing will be done. We just have to identify what will be published. We have decided on several themes. We are going to see where there is existing work that can be re-published... ..CY Thomas' *The Poor and the Powerless*, for example. We have a work programme. I have approached the Caribbean Development Bank to support the University of Guyana Press. We had the first conversation and we have to prepare a concept note by the end of this month. (April). We are moving ahead.

**GR:** Where do you want to take this University in terms of expansion?

**VC:** Here are some observations. No national university including the University of Guyana can be, in physical terms, in too many places at the same time. We have a campus here and we have one at Tain. There are needs elsewhere. The Mayor of Linden says he wants a campus there. When I went to Anna Regina they said they want one in Essequibo.

**GR:** Is Tain a challenge right now?

**VC:** What the human capital flight means is that the people who teach the courses have to move from one campus to the other. Not everybody wants to do that and so there are challenges associated with delivering the range of degree programmes and getting the research done. The University is not only about teaching and so, for me, as we build the Renaissance we have got to find out how we are going to raise the game of research. We are also constrained in our physical location.

The next point has to do with how we might leverage the technology in the places where you cannot have a physical presence and in the context of doing that how might we partner with businesses in those areas and with civic organizations to be able to make that presence felt technologically.

My vision to establish a **School of Energy and Mines** envisages Linden as the place to have the new campus that will

do specializations in energy and mines. But there is need in Essequibo too..... not only in terms of setting up the physical plant but having the infrastructure. Who are going to teach quality courses? We have a reality in Guyana. Too many part time lecturers. We do not have enough full - time lecturers.

**GR:** So it is both a money and skills challenge?

**VC:** It is. One plays on the other. You are not able to pay people well so they move to UWI or go to Florida. Those who we have are working in Ministries or companies and teaching part time and so students will get short changed.

**GR:** So have you been able to get that across as effectively as you want to?

**VC:** I have not. Changing that reality means we have to pay better to retain the good ones that we have. But there is always a pull factor. I lost a Chief of Staff last year to migration. Almost every year this country loses people. It is said that some 80% of our graduates from University have gone somewhere else; so the pool of skills is limited. That will change because we are getting oil. I was at a forum last year and I found a number of persons, not only Guyanese, wanting to come but then we have a problem keeping quality people.

**GR:** Do you ever worry about the likelihood of getting up and thinking to yourself that except I get the right people to work with me, I am not sure I can do this?

**VC:** No! That is not a worry of mine. I will be reaching out to get those right people.

**GR:** .....and you are confident that you will get some of them?

**VC:** I will keep trying because getting them depends upon getting appropriate salaries. Part of the challenge of the University is part of the challenge of the society. When people want to come here - whether they are Guyanese or not - and they see in the press all the crime, people who visit for interviews and observe power shortages, it does not help. When people visit and they see the low quality of professionalism in so many elements of society they are affected; so it is not only a function of what the University does. We do not exist in a cocoon. We exist in a wider society and when you bring someone, whether from Jamaica or Miami, whether Guyanese or not, that person has to live off campus, that person has to deal with the traffic, has to deal with the crime; so there are more factors than simply the salary, but at least you have to start with the salary. So I will keep looking I may not succeed in getting all that I may want but I will continue looking

**GR:** The last question has to do with managing the image of the University. Over a long period of time this University operated in a kind of cocoon where what happened here stayed here and once you tried as media to try to reach in to take the message of the University out, there was very limited success. What are we doing

about that?

**VC:** Let me say two things. No entity no university's image is the function of the PR. You may have the best PR but what you are actually doing 'sucks' you have to do things differently. You have to market yourself, rebrand yourself. I have a project that Professor Paloma Mohammed is in charge of..... Alumni, Civic Philanthropy and PR. I have asked them to come up with a plan to establish a **Corporate Communications Unit**. You should speak with Professor Mohammed on what she is doing as part of the rebranding. I brought in a consultant for fund - raising, I brought in three individuals - Impressions, ..... media and Jacksons Jewelry as part of our rebranding and merchandizing. So we have a plan in that respect but the plan is not about what we can market; the plan is also about doing things that are worthy of doing. I had Keith Waith here doing things in Berbice, doing things at Theatre Guild, doing things at Castellani House, doing things at Resonance House, my residence. It is what we do that we can now take and market. We started a monthly electronic newsletter. Any time you want to talk, call me, I got an invitation last night to appear on a radio programme from Bobby Viera, I have been on several radio and television programmes in Guyana and in the USA.

We have started to do something different with our press releases; so it is not only what you do as PR but what you do directly.

**GR:** You are the Principal here. Do you get a chance to interface with the students, to get them to buy into your ideas?

**VC:** Oh yes, I am very active on Facebook. I started a monthly meeting with students, I have done three Town Hall meetings, two of which were with students, four Town Hall meetings...five when I think of the one I had with the students in Berbice. I had a special session with the sports folks; so, for example, we have rugby team and I learnt of the rugby team from the Argentine Ambassador. He was the first Ambassador who wanted to see me. He said, Vice Chancellor how can I help you? Do you know that Guyana has a good rugby team including the University of Guyana? So I met with the coaches and we have a plan to do something. I even challenged the students. I want to beat some of them at tennis. There is a plan to get a court. If you go down to Technology you will see a sign marked **Future Home of Students Complex**. It is a two-storeyed facility. The students designed it. I got myself involved in the Hindu Society and was part of the Rangoli competition.