

EDITORIAL

UG: The Centre of National Transformation

The establishment of the University of Guyana (UG) in 1963, three years before Guyana's independence enshrined the national ideal of a well-educated people from an idea to an institution. The sentiments that informed the formation of the institution were noble, forward thinking and courageous.

Prof. Harold Drayton, the first Deputy Vice Chancellor (1963-64), describes the university's establishment as "... an act of faith. With no capital funds for buildings and equipment...with slender recurrent annual government subsidies, and the related foreseeable difficulties of staff recruitment."

Fifty-five years ago, UG was started with US\$104,000. One could argue that it was mal-nutritioned from birth. At its inception, it did not even have a home. It was housed at Queen's College, and its 164 students went to school at night. Later, a gift from Bookers and several governments created the campus at Turkeyen in 1970, which never was envisaged to host the more than 6,000 students and close to 900 workers currently there. The strain on the infrastructure, and the daily fight to keep things operational, have been unimaginable.

Despite all this, UG has produced over 25,000 graduates in some 60 different areas. About 70% of them have migrated over the years; the rest occupy the top echelons of this nation's (and several other countries') industry, public service, commerce, education, and other areas.

UG, Guyana's only national university, provides some 80% of Guyana's university-educated workforce.

Without a doubt, UG has given to this country—and other countries—much more than it has ever received from any source: government, business or its alumni, who benefitted most from the best education their money did not buy.

The lecturers and administrators at the University have subsidized the education of every alumnus, and often sacrificed their careers and health by their resolute plodding on despite deteriorating conditions and poor salaries. That is a laudable and incontrovertible fact!

Every Vice Chancellor who has taken the helm of the University of Guyana, therefore, has had to manage what could be considered the Janus-faced problem of too few resources with no real autonomy to act to solve these problems, and a public that generally seems to think that UG is UG's problem.

In 2010, Vice Chancellor Prof. Lawrence Carrington commissioned a study with funding from the Caribbean Development Bank. It was aimed at "fixing UG" and providing a road map for its transformation. That report, which is available in the UG library, is known as "The Hamilton Report". It has had the advantage of taking a long historical glance back to two other important studies that preceded it: The 1996 Presidential Commission on UG, and the 2009-2012 Strategic Plan for UG.

All three of these studies have pointed to about 20 existential problems that beset the institution. Many of the problems are interlocking and have to be addressed together. They include "improving compensation to academic staff, attaining superior academic quality on a sustained basis, sustaining a systematic research contribution to development, ensuring labor market relevant products, expanding and empowering the senior management of the institution, incentivizing students for studies in science and technology, recruiting more competitively, mobilizing private investment and operation of on-campus commercial services and mobilizing alumni and business to become more effective partners."

Professor E. Nigel Harris, UG's Chancellor, and a former Vice Chancellor of UWI, established a Transformational Task Force shortly after his installation. The recommendations of that body were approved by the UG Council, and they were adapted for implementation.

The new Vice Chancellor, Professor Ivelaw Lloyd Griffith, and his team have picked up this mantle and are sprinting with it. In less than 10 months since Griffith's appointment they have begun to address issues identified in all the three reports from 1996 to 2012, and they are doing so pragmatically and tangibly.

Among other things, this is evidenced through securing a 19.33 percent increase in recurrent funding from the government for 2017, negotiating with the loan agency to cover post-graduate programmes, establishing the School for Entrepreneurship and Business Innovation (SEBI), establishing an Undergraduate Research Program, and launching a University of Guyana Press. Moreover, the new Vice Chancellor has been leveraging the Diaspora and the local business community, creating the Vice Chancellor's Fund for Strategic Initiatives as part of that effort. That fund was used to provide relief to the 12 students and two staff members who lost all their possessions in a fire in Cummings Lodge this past January. The victims received \$100,000 each to help rebuild their lives.

Notable, too, are the Turkeyen and Tain Talks, the next edition of which will be held on May 10 in Berbice and will focus on Oil in Guyana, international student recruitment has

begun, the Etiquette Training for Student Leaders, and the improvements in classroom and dorm facilities at Turkeyen Campus and at the Dennis Irving Hall are there for all to see. Construction work is moving ahead at Turkeyen for a Student Complex, a Math and Science Complex, and a Maintenance Complex. Plus, renovations soon will begin in the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry, the Pere Street property, and in the George Walcott Lecture Theatre.

Contrary to what has been published, three new Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) positions were not created. Perusal of the Hamilton Report would find a recommendation for four DVC positions as part of addressing the inadequacy of leadership at a university of this size and complexity.

The leadership reorganization by Vice Chancellor Griffith last October saw the addition of one DVC position.

Thus, there are now three DVC positions rather than two; for Academic Engagement, Planning and International Engagement, and Philanthropy, Alumni, and Civic Engagement.

The Renaissance now underway at UG involves building and strengthening partnerships with government agencies, international academic and non-academic institutions, local businesses, and the Diaspora.

Indeed, the Vice Chancellor recently signed agreements with Movie Towne for partnerships in solar energy

production and student housing, and he will be hosting an historic Diaspora Engagement Conference in July. Many of these initiatives, especially the infrastructure and fund-and friend-raising ones, will take some time to mature. But the nation is in an urgent moment and wants everything now.

The University of Guyana does have the leadership it needs. However, it will take more than leadership, faith and platitudes for UG to quickly develop the torque needed to power this nation in this most critical of moments. UG still needs all kinds of resources.

These must come from multiple sources, since the needs are historically so dire. One of those sources will have to be students' fees.

According to the Hamilton Report, UG's fees are 75% less than the next institution in the region offering the lowest fees. Interestingly, too, last week the University of The West Indies announced fee hikes.

Noteworthy, too, is that UG's fees for some programmes are lower than those charged at some private primary and high schools in Guyana.

This is dysfunctionality on stilts! Nobody ever wants to raise fees. However, this is now unavoidable.

The UG administration is very mindful of some of the nation's economic realities, which is why it has worked with the government for support mechanisms through the Loan Agency, and has launched a scholarship drive.

We want to ensure that no-one is denied an education if they desire one and have the aptitude for such. As a nation, especially with regard to developing UG, we must mature away from the messiah complex where everything is placed upon the shoulders of a single person. This complex shifts the focus away from the collective responsibility to take oars and help row the boat, and it ensures that nothing but destructive criticism, misinformation, and mischief takes place.

UG's problem is not the Vice Chancellor or his dedicated team, some of whom have been at UG working in increasingly insalubrious conditions for decades.

The problem is that this beloved and centrally important national institution was conceived in faith, born mal-nutritioned and was never adequately nourished so it could develop normally, to the point where somehow people now confuse striving for excellence with extravagance.

Part of the problem, also, is that some people want change, but they do not want to change. It is important not just to dream change, but to do change.

It is time for the nation to pay its debts to UG and those who serve it. UG has credible and forward-thinking leadership, it has the vision, it has a roadmap, the will and dynamism to change.

It now needs the support of everyone as it takes the central role in the transformation of Guyana.