

FRANKLY SPEAKING

A UNIVERSITY OF DOMINICA?

Some time ago, the Prime Minister of Dominica expressed his intention “to finance the construction of a state of the art Dominica State College” to replace the present facilities established in 2002. Not long after, a vision for that institution was expressed by the college’s Chair of the Board of Governors for upgrading the college to “full university status”. Both announcements appeared to have been made without benefit of a preliminary assessment. Indeed, following the appointment of the college’s current President, the Prime Minister quite rightly raised a number of questions concerning the college’s performance in meeting its mission and objectives, and on that basis he properly called for an investigative review. To my knowledge, such a review has not been done, or has not been reported. One might then logically conclude that the suggestion of an upgrade to university status is at best premature, if not questionable, at this time. Yet as recently as the last graduation exercises, the college’s President mooted the prospect of a degree-granting institution.

The concept if a Dominica State College was the brain-child of the Prime Minister while still Minister of Education and it came into existence under his watch. Let it also be acknowledged that whatever the reservations in some quarters initially, the College (despite its short-comings) has proved to be beneficial for the country over its past eight years of existence, with prospects for even greater contribution in the future. So understandably, this institution is near and dear to the Prime Minister’s heart and its management, operations and prospects should be closely monitored. After all, the College in this or some other form is important in achieving the government’s stated policy objective of “a graduate in every household”.

Currently, the Dominica State College, with a 2009 enrollment of approximately 2500 students and a faculty of some sixty-six instructors offers tertiary education to the Associate-ship level in four Faculties; Arts and Sciences; Health Sciences; Education; Applied Arts and Technology on a six semester, two year basis. The College advertises these programs as major platforms for growing the competences of the local workforce, as well as providing a recognized accreditation towards a first degree at co-operating universities regionally and overseas. (The College anticipates offering a Bachelor’s degree in Nursing, and this represents a major step forward in meeting deficiencies in the local health services sector). Though less flaunted, but of as great importance are the College’s Adult and Continuing Education programs providing certification in such areas as Early Childhood Education and Tourism and Hospitality together with further opportunities for persons in the community to register for “personal and professional” development courses.

Government subvention is the primary source of funding, followed by revenues from “Business Ventures” and from Continuing Education fees to a lesser extent. The specific amount of revenues from general student fees is not particularized.

Dominica State College Annual Budget.

	2004/2005	2005/2006
Government Subvention	\$3,190,600	\$2,794,600
Donations	3,500	10,000
Continuing Education	20,000	20,000
Business Ventures	32,500	43,500.

(Source: Erma Alfred, Dominica National report on Higher Education, Faculty of Education, Dominica State College, Nov. 2005).

However, on the basis of data on total Budgeted Expenditures for the same two time periods of \$4,549,942 (2004/2005) and \$5,406,018 (2005/2006), one makes the bold assumption (subject to correction) that direct student fees accounts for some \$1,303,000 and \$2,538,000 respectively. If the above assumptions are correct, the overall trends in revenues hold hopeful signs for the college. It is also a commendable sign that the college has explored possibilities of a revenue stream from quasi-commercial ventures associated with its education activities. This has been a very successful concept pursued in other comparable situations where “sweat equity” supplements or replaces tuition fees and students with limited resources have the option to produce saleable items such as agricultural products, nursery stock, processed goods such as packaged milk and cheese, juices, smoked meats and sausages, and other items such as furniture, clothing sold through college managed and controlled outlets. These may extend to the operation of hospitality services such as guest houses, restaurants, laundries, all of which double in providing real life experiences to students in their chosen fields, while providing income to the college.

The Prime Minister’s announcement that a concessionary loan of \$35 million (\$EC), (in other texts it is referred to as a grant) has been secured from the People’s Republic of China to transform the Dominica State College must however be assessed in the context of the record of the college’s past eight years, the current economic condition of the nation and financial constraints of government, and the very real contributions that a trained and educated workforce can and should make in preparing Dominica to face a globalizing world of more rigorous international competition. At the same time, the Prime Minister’s concerns must be viewed through the ever-demanding policy lens of “what is the most cost-effective way” of responding to these complex issues.

The case for a more educated populace is not a difficult one to make:

- (a) Education is the surest and most successful avenue to stable income-earning capacity, and for a rise in individual and community standard of living as a result of brighter employment prospects;
- (b) An expanded and more educated middle-class based on a trained and progressive work-force offers a major attractor to local and foreign investment;

- (c) **The path to personal success through and up to university levels presents a “demonstration effect” of hope and promise to the aspiring young.**

Indeed, persons who have been the beneficiaries of such opportunities in days when avenues for higher education were few and far between, can vouch for the benefits, personal, professional, financial and social, that derive from post-secondary training. What then are the issues raised by the Prime Minister’s call to re-evaluate the mission, performance and future prospects for the Dominica State College within an apparently active vision in some quarters to proceed to University status? One must assume that the concept of a full university status is part of the called-for investigation.

At least four fundamental questions seem to be posed, all of which require some examination, even if persuasive answers may not always be available:

- (a) **Is the decision to apply a \$35 million (ECD) loan/grant to upgrading the Dominica State College to university status, the most cost-effective one at this time, given other options for tertiary education, the training needs of the economy and society, and the competing social and economic demands for such funds?**
- (b) **Is a University of Dominica the most effective way of achieving the objective of improving the quality of the Dominica workforce to whatever level the society deems necessary?**
- (c) **What are the basic demographic, social, economic, technical and institutional infrastructures required for maintaining a viable University, and can they be made available in Dominica to the level, and within the time period, required?**
- (d) **Assuming unfettered access by deserving Dominicans to full university facilities is essential at this time (for whatever reason that might be advanced) are there other models other than an on-site full university which might be adopted with greater efficacy?**

Let it be understood that the widespread location of Offshore American or Canadian Colleges and Universities in the Caribbean with some apparent success is not a persuasive argument in favor of parallel adventures by local or even regional entities. Firstly, these (predominantly medical) schools are to all intents and purposes not of the region, though physically located in it. Their capitalization and student intake (numbers, supply stream, affordability etc) bear no relation to local/regional realities. Secondly, based on their financial resources (own-account, loan sourcing or flow-sourcing) they are able to attract internationally competitive faculty and staff beyond the ability of regional institutions to do so.

Thirdly, with a high degree of academic specialization (i.e. medical studies) they are able to shed the baggage of lower revenue-earning academic streams and support services. Fourthly, many students are able to source foreign government funding such as student loans from their home countries to subsidize their offshore studies. Fifthly, College operators are able to benefit from attractive location incentive programs, lower local wage rates for non-professional staff, lower operating (e.g.) maintenance costs, while yet drawing in higher than average per student fees.

From its website, it is possible to obtain an overall assessment of the operations of the college...its annual budget, revenue sources, its schedule of capital and operating expenditures by major heads (faculty and staff salaries, building and equipment construction and maintenance, bursaries and scholarships, student services etc). It is more difficult to obtain some historical perspective on the impact of the institution. It had a graduating class of 283 students in 2009 which is stated to represent a 15% access to tertiary education for (all or only qualified?) Dominican students. It is also proposed to increase that ratio to 30% at some unspecified future date! Unknown also, is whether or not an upgrade to university and full degree-granting status is likely to divert students now going overseas to this local institution. Three major considerations will apply. One, the range of programs which will be offered at this (new) university and two, the quality of the programs, including local and regional accreditation issues which will be offered, and three, the relative cost of available options.

It has been intimated in some quarters that when the physical expansion program is complete, the facilities might be made available to the University of the West Indies (UWI) for the location of a fifth campus. It also appears that some discussion for an affiliation of some sort is already underway in that regard. An enthusiastic response by UWI to such an overture would be surprising not only for reasons of precedence which would be set, (what if all OECS countries made a similar request?) but also because of the increasing financial constraints that UWI is continuing to face. In such a context, there would be a real risk of “watering down” the quality of UWI academic offerings. Professor Nigel Harris, the UWI Pro-Vice Chancellor is reported to have expressed similar concerns in reviewing the quality of education available from other regional tertiary institutions.

In such an environment, Dominica’s push for an expanded and upgraded tertiary education capability must also consider an option other than an on-island “bricks and mortar” solution. At a time when Jamaica has announced a reduction to its UWI financial commitments by some \$1 billion (Ja), a \$35 million (EC) infusion by Dominica, astutely negotiated, might well have led to an arrangement that more than meets national tertiary education requirements for the foreseeable future.

One needs to be reminded that university education is less and less an “in situ” experience for a large variety of disciplines, requiring that students assemble and

be accommodated on a physical campus. While this may remain a necessary and perhaps preferred option for some (especially professional) disciplines, “distance learning” of various types and methodologies is fast gaining acceptance and application in both developed and developing countries. Its benefits may be summarized as follows:

- (a) It represents a tremendous cost-saving to both the institution and the students concerned.
- (b) It minimizes individual career disruptions by allowing the student to continue employment while pursuing either a full-time or part-time program;
- (c) Particularly in human resource-poor countries, it maintains the stability and integrity of private and public institutions where student-employees are located and might continue to be employed;
- (d) By maintaining students in their home environments, it reduces the risk of “leakage” following graduation because of non-returnees;
- (e) It maintains the stability of family and community life, especially for married students and students with established households;
- (f) It permits students to draw from and to contribute to the knowledge base of their home territories by local research, surveys and case studies, and to improve the quality of information and decision-making, even during the course of training.

Fortuitously, in this transition from “bricks to clicks”, the University of the West Indies is itself a growing leader within the region in distance learning through its Open Campuses. But there is no reason why this option may not be pursued with several other well-accredited institutions simultaneously based on their areas of specialization and standing in disciplines of interest to Dominica!! In the final analysis, the eventual policy direction followed must be significantly guided by the quality of the educational product which will result and the context of the society that will be served.

The most significant and fundamental issue to be resolved is, to what end and at what pace should a reservoir of skills leading to a more highly trained work-force be produced? There is a growing core of research available which indicates that centers of economic growth are positively correlated to the presence of a pool of knowledge and expertise. In an age of global competitiveness, it is not only the number of graduates resident in an area that determines success, but also the quality of such accreditations. A University of Dominica, in order to meet and eventually challenge regional and international competition must strive to generate a good graduate product and eventually a competitive economy and society. In this, it will be competing globally for faculty, support staff, resources and high caliber graduate students and academic researchers in the future. Not to recognize

and to plan for that day is to doom the budding institution to mediocrity or worse.

So what are the likely expectations for a University of Dominica in the future? One might draw from a number of foreign comparisons, each of which will be instructive in its own way. It is also useful not to confine oneself merely to developing country comparisons, tempting as that may be, as this is not only where the competition lies. For purposes of such a review, an example is drawn from the Canadian experience with data specific to primarily undergraduate universities. (Source: MacLeans, *2010 Guide to Canadian Universities. Profile of 69 Schools.*(\$ Cdn).

- (a) **Student/Faculty Ratio: Range 12.5 – 49.4 (Median 18.9).**
- (b) **Operating Budgets—(Expenditures/weighted full-time equivalent student) Range \$16,772 – \$9,008 (Median value \$11,628).**
- (c) **Research Expenditure – (Income from sponsored research/full-time faculty). Range \$93,723 - \$6,361 (Median value \$33, 225).**
- (d) **Scholarships/Bursaries as a percentage of Operating Expenditure. Range 8.9% - 2.5% (Median Value 4.9%)**
- (e) **Student Services as a percentage of Operating Expenditures. Range 10.8% - 3.6% (Median Value 5.4%)**
- (f) **Library Holdings as volumes per full-time student. Range 472 – 20 (Median Value 141)**
- (g) **Library Holdings. Percent of Library budget spent on updating university holdings including electronic access. Range 68.7% - 19.1%. (Median Value 37.2%)**
- (h) **Average Class Size: Years 1 - 2. Range 76.2 – 24.3. (Median Value 42.4) Years 3 – 4. Range 33.8 – 12.7. (Median Value 20). (Excludes labs, tutorials, practicums).**
- (i) **Faculty with Terminal Degrees. Percent full-time instructional faculty (Fall 2008) with PhD, First professional, Terminal degrees in their field. Range 99.1% - 69.1%. (Median Value 91.7%).**

The purpose of the above indicators is not to suggest that a proposed University of Dominica must necessarily be designed within these parameters. It is primarily to offer guidelines on where the competition is and, if practical realities exist to prevent a local institution from meeting these indices, to sensitize local decision-makers to design responses “outside the box”, which are effective in addressing local conditions. For example, existing information indicates a budgeted expenditure/student of \$1650 (2004/2005), an approximate faculty/student ratio of 1:50 (2008/2009) even without benefit of faculty with terminal academic degrees.

Local authorities will be better able to generate precise comparison figures for the existing College with indications on how large the operational gaps are for the various headings. From data available, it would appear that unless the chasm is leaped in some dramatic and workable fashion, a University of Dominica will continue as a poor fifth-rate cousin and the best and brightest of our secondary school students will continue to be lured away or voluntarily prefer offshore schools for obvious and understandable reasons. Consequently, the mere construction of upgrades to the college or even the construction of a spanking new campus, deserving as that may be, is only a minimal first step to the emergence of a deserving University and the benefits that it might bring.

For completeness, one should address the case of the small, specialized tertiary educational institutions that can be validated in both developed and developing societies. These schools provide opportunities in such special conditions and circumstances as meeting the needs of minorities, aboriginal peoples, or confine their course offerings to limited disciplines such as Fine Arts or Religious or Military Studies, or Universities/Colleges located in strategic resource areas oriented to those conditions such as Forestry, Mining or Marine Studies. Institutions such as these may experience operational indicators different from those quoted above. It is not supposed that a University of Dominica is now being planned as one such as these. Another point of difference may lie in whether of not the institution is a privately funded or publicly funded institution and the extent of private endowments on an on-going or special levy basis.

All of the foregoing discussion serves to highlight the fact that the decision facing Dominica's policy-makers is not an easy or simple one. It is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional and it is not sufficient for individuals, no matter how eminent in their fields, to simply endorse this or that proposal without a reasoned argument for their positions. This discussion does not however suggest that the people of Dominica should abandon their objective in exasperation because, indeed, a variety of alternative responses exist for their consideration. The challenge is to design an appropriate, feasible and affordable response. Several directions have been indicated in the course of this discussion and might be explored individually or in combination.

In summary, the following highlights the primary options, without a recommendation or preference for any:

1. A working relationship with one or more respected, well-established, well-accredited and well-funded institution which is able to provide linked programs in various disciplines according to competence for the benefit of local students under a distance learning and/or on-campus arrangement for some or all of their university training.

2. A collaborative venture among several jurisdictions in the same situation in which the local (Dominica) institution exists, providing a basic, example two year program, followed by a final two year course offering at a sister location of specialization or the option of year 2 and 3 continuation on a distance learning format. In this way, each of the cooperating institutions may develop areas of specialization without the need for program duplication.
3. A widening, strengthening and deepening of linkages within the regional (University of the West Indies) framework under some mutually feasible and acceptable financial arrangement. This might include mandatory on-campus education for professional degrees as medicine, engineering and perhaps law and part local (years 1 and 2) and campus (year 3/4) for Arts, Sciences and Social Sciences including Business, Administration, Education etc. In time, this relationship might deepen to off-campus degree education for all non-professional disciplines.
4. Conversion of all established territorial State Colleges to poly-technical institutes each with one or more areas of specialization but all sharing in an integrated Arts and Sciences program from a common center such as under 3, above or with the alternative of an extra-regional association with a major university, especially, in the professional disciplines.

Finally, and although obvious, Dominica and its sister territorial jurisdictions can only properly plan their educational and social requirements for the future within a more general policy-embracing strategic framework for economic and social development. It is too expensive to fund or provide opportunities for open-ended tertiary education, unrelated to the projected developmental needs of these territories. Secondly, an essential part of future programming is the earliest flowering of locally trained personnel with a competence and interest in technical innovation, research and development, new product development, systems design etc that might catapult regional economies and their products into the mainstream of the global economy and society. Consequently, any model chosen must have the capacity and the in-built design capability to allow the emergence of creditable graduate schools to spear-head research, to mentor on the ground officials in the public and private sector and to generate Centers of Excellence in a variety of fields destined to be the economic levers of tomorrow.

This commentary would not be complete without one final observation which may, indeed, be a critical factor in this exercise. Much has been written on the phenomenon of the “brain drain” which some believe may have contributed to a stall and even reversal of the social and economic progress of these islands. Be that as it may. The fact is that Caribbean nationals resident overseas are becoming disenchanted and disillusioned over the current state of the island societies and the evident resistance of some local power brokers to engage their Diaspora in a meaningful and co-operative nation-building effort. At the same time, nationals abroad are wary of direct investment in a society where their voice is smothered,

their petitions go unheard and their hopes dashed by baseless suspicions. It may well be that a well designed tertiary educational program, under competent leadership attuned to the realities of the 21st century, sensitive to the needs of the islands and insulated from meddling partisan control, might be an attractive focus for financial support by non-resident nationals. What if a Tertiary Education Endowment Trust Fund could be established for such a purpose; what if representatives of non-resident nationals were appointed to the Board administering such a Fund; what if non-resident nationals could be persuaded to contribute a fixed percentage of income such as 1-3% to such a Fund; what if non-residents undertook to engage academic institutions in their “host countries” in accelerating the teaching, extension, research and innovation capabilities of local tertiary institutions; what if

There are no limits to what might be accomplished. Sadly, policy and decision-makers in Dominica have been slow and even resistant in the past to boldly seize new and hopeful initiatives for information-based alliances, especially those which are the springboard of the new economy. One such example was the proposed Government of Dominica-Archbold Consortium Memorandum of Understanding which would have embraced the Dominica State College in a leading edge research experience. Whatever fears might have lurked within various quarters within the Dominica bureaucracy on the conduct of such an overture could surely have been addressed through disciplined, knowledgeable and informed negotiation. This, unfortunately, was not to be the case and the opportunity has been allowed to flounder, hopefully, temporarily. Today, the Caribbean is crying out for just such research and development initiatives that in the developed world are increasingly coming out of tertiary institutions. Witness the proliferation of university campus-based Science and Technology Research Parks as crucibles for economic and social progress. Will a University of Dominica or a revitalized Dominica State College be empowered to lead the country along such avenues to the future?

Food for thought and prods for action, I hope. That’s the way I see it, anyway!

[This essay is a memorial to Justice A.N.J. Matthew, an eminent role model and friend. Rest in Peace.]