

# Regional University and National Development: The Case of The University of the West Indies\*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the experience of The University of the West Indies (UWI) as a regional university and reflects on the future of its transnational character. It traces the evolution of the UWI system and presents a profile of its structure and functioning as well as the organization of its programmes. It analyses the reasons for and the consequences of the systemic restructuring it underwent in 1984. It focuses on some of the key issues confronting UWI as a regional university: the question of access, the contribution to development, and the problem of funding and resources.

A university is a living organism that draws its nutrients from the society it serves. The patterns and nature of this close symbiotic relationship are determined by the character, beliefs and needs of the society (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:v).

A statement such as this could easily be taken for granted with reference to the universities in the developed countries. However, a review of the history of university education in the less developed countries reveals the difficulties these countries have been facing in tuning their universities to the developmental needs of their populations.

The problem of fostering a symbiotic relationship between university and national development has been nowhere as piquant as in the countries which attained independence after prolonged subjection to European colonialism. In most such emergent countries universities were a colonial implantation and most of them are still struggling to cast off their colonial legacy. The University of the West Indies (hereafter UWI), the cornerstone of

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higher education in the Anglophone Caribbean, is a case in point.

Unlike the universities in such former British colonies as in Africa and Asia (see Ashby and Anderson, 1966), UWI is a unique experiment in higher education. Its uniqueness lies in its regional or, more appropriately, transnational character: It now serves over five million people dispersed over a 3,200 kilometre stretch of ocean floor in fourteen different countries. What is remarkable, UWI's nature as a regional university has survived the short-lived political experiment of the West Indies Federation (1958-62). In the course of its evolution over the past forty-seven years, UWI has been striving to transform the pattern of development in the region 'from one that is principally dependent on natural resources, to one dependent on human resources and knowledge' (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:vii).

### **Evolution and Organization**

The University of the West Indies was initially established at Mona, Jamaica, in 1948 as a college in special relation with the University of London. It incorporated the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture at St. Augustine, Trinidad, in 1960 as a second campus. It gained the full university status through a Royal Charter in 1962, and added a third campus at Cave Hill, Barbados in 1963.

UWI is a regional university in the true sense of the term. It has three campuses in the three largest countries, called 'campus countries' in university parlance: Mona in Jamaica (which is its headquarters), St. Augustine in Trinidad and Tobago, and Cave Hill in Barbados.<sup>1</sup> The non-campus countries include Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, The British Virgin Islands, The Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, St. Christopher (St. Kitts) and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent.

Besides the three major campuses, UWI has established a School of Hotel Management and Tourism in the Bahamas, eight Extra-Mural University Centres in other non-campus countries, two in Jamaica and one each in Barbados and Trinidad. Guyana was originally a fully participating country in the UWI system, but since 1962 it has its own university (University of Guyana) and contributes under special arrangements to the professional faculties.

Traditionally, the regional character of UWI has been emphasized in the following (Williams and Harvey, 1985:12):

- the joint regional financing on a triennial basis,

- a regionally composed governing body,
- a complement of academic and administrative staff drawn from the Caribbean region and, where necessary, from the wider international community, and
- a student intake principally from the English-speaking

Caribbean area.

Three supra-university committees facilitate the regional approach to the funding of UWI's activities: The Conference of the Caribbean Heads of Government, the University Grants Committee (UGC), and the Legal Advisory Committee. The UGC, established in 1962, is the main agency responsible for determining the quantum of funding that each of the contributing countries should provide. It has two major subdivisions, namely, the Permanent Secretariat (staffed by representatives of each country's Ministry of Finance) and the Ministerial Policy Committee (consisting of each contributing government's Minister of Education or his representative). The former evaluates and reports on the University's annual and triennial estimates to the latter. The latter considers the report and makes the final decision on budget allocations (Williams and Harvey, 1985:25-26).

Overall, as an organization UWI is large and complex, but decentralized. It is governed by a University Council (which meets once a year) and a Senate (which meets once every three years, with powers in between meetings delegated to a Finance and General Purposes Committee and a University Academic Committee respectively). The multi-campus nature of UWI necessarily implies a parallel system of university and campus committees with delegated authority.

The academic work at UWI is organized in eight main faculties: agriculture; arts and general studies; education; engineering; law; natural sciences; medical sciences; and social sciences. All campuses offer the basic academic programmes in arts, natural and social sciences and in education, but there are variations in subject offerings (see *Commonwealth Universities Yearbook 1994*:2414-5). Courses in agriculture and engineering are offered only at St. Augustine. Courses in medical sciences were earlier offered only at Mona (with clinical training provided at St. Augustine and Cave Hill). They are now offered at the second medical school at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex in Trinidad.

UWI has special relations with agricultural, teacher-training, technical, and theological colleges in the region. It has collaborative programmes with

many of these colleges. It undertakes the accreditation of programmes of non-university institutions of higher education and validates their qualifications. The Institute of International Relations at St. Augustine and the Caribbean Meteorological Institute in Barbados are affiliated to UWI. Both these institutes offer programmes leading to degree and diplomas awarded by UWI. Such arrangements are gradually being extended to other tertiary institutions in the region.

### **Systemic Restructuring**

The logic underlying the shaping of UWI as a regional university was endorsed both by the colonial authorities and by the nationalist leaders of the region. For the colonial authorities a regional university was essentially an administrative convenience. They could in no way contemplate establishing separate universities in a large number of tiny States scattered across what is essentially a small geographically defined region. In fact, this rationale also played a role in their efforts at political tutelage, as they sought to urge the local political elites to create a federal system of West Indian government.

In the view of the nationalist leaders, on the other hand, the considerations of cost and size were quite important. Some contemporary intellectuals saw in the concept of a regional university an opportunity to develop 'a nationalist-regionalist' outlook among the intelligentsia, and so benefit as a people from the common struggles against slavery, indenture, and colonialism in the region. As Thomas (1984:29) observes, '...the university, like [the] cricket team became a working symbol of West Indian regionalism. This was sufficiently strong for The University of the West Indies to survive the collapse of the West Indies federation. It is one of history's ironies that the University received its charter as an independent regional institution at about the same time that the West Indies federation collapsed.'

The break-up of the three-year-old West Indies Federation in 1962, nevertheless, had its impact on UWI as a fledgling regional university. With the move towards independence by a number of territories, starting with Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in 1962, UWI even faced the threat of fragmentation. In fact, Guyana, which was a fully participating country till that year, broke away from the regional system to form its own university (University of Guyana).

The 1970s were, indeed, 'the challenging decade' in UWI's history. On the one hand, it had to vindicate the confidence reposed in it as the engine of Caribbean development. It had, in particular, to steer the region's educational advancement. Mention must be made in this context of the introduction of the Caribbean Examinations Certificate (CXC). UWI played a crucial role in the establishment (in 1972) and development of the Caribbean Examinations Council under the aegis of the Caribbean Economic Community (CARICOM) by agreement among regional governments, including that of Guyana.

On the other hand, with the returns to their investment in UWI not matching their expectations of it, the contributing governments became increasingly dissatisfied with its service. This essentially brought the political elites into conflict with the university academicians, 'who were seen as rabble rousers hiding behind the privileges of campus-havens and academic tenure' (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:215).

The review committees which investigated the political-academic imbroglio proposed measures for restructuring the UWI system 'to achieve greater autonomy and to emphasize territorial rather than regional input' (James-Bryan, 1992:731). The restructuring strengthened the relations between the campuses and the respective campus countries, and resulted in further decentralization of authority. More important, Offices of University Services were established at Cave Hill (for the Eastern Caribbean) and at Mona (for the North-Western Caribbean) for coordinating the delivery of all university services to the non-campus countries.

The response to the 1984 restructuring was mixed. Most academicians and administrators within UWI believe that restructuring has provided the campus-country governments with the opportunity to shape their higher education systems. Restructuring is also welcomed as a means of encouraging each campus to be more responsive to the developmental needs of the campus country.

However, there is also the perception that the regional character of the university will be endangered unless a judicious balance is carefully struck between the priorities of campus countries and the interests of their non-campus counterparts. Not only are the smaller non-campus countries suspicious of the ambition of the campus countries, but also there is rivalry among the campus countries themselves, each with its own agenda of national development.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the *Report on An Institutional Review of The University of the West Indies* observed that 'University "Centre" research units are

particularly concerned about parochialism and national biases in funding of research programmes' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:27).

By the same logic, restructuring could not be expected to be welcomed by the non-campus countries. Most of these countries, particularly those belonging to the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), perceive that restructuring has made UWI less accessible to them. Even the Offices of University Services are viewed as being ineffective in serving their needs, especially considering the inadequate funding of these Offices.

At the political level there was even the fear that UWI would be eventually controlled by the campus countries, especially after the agreement for campus-country governments to take the full responsibility for the financing of their own campuses. These perceptions were confirmed by the OECS Secretariat, which noted that it is 'necessary to articulate and implement a programme of academic restructuring to meet the needs of the non-campus countries and to preserve UWI's regional character' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:27).

In retrospect, the 1984 restructuring of the UWI system seems to have essentially confirmed the apprehensions of its then Chancellor Sir Allen Lewis, who said: 'We should not be surprised therefore if we find that under the new arrangements a campus tends to develop its own individuality and to place greater emphasis upon the perceived needs of the campus country than upon regional needs' (quoted by Pereira, 1984:15).

### **Access and Enrolment**

Apparently, there has been a phenomenal expansion in student enrolment since the establishment of UWI: from thirty-three in 1948-49 to 15,231 in 1993-94 (University of the West Indies, 1993-94:1-2). But UWI is widely perceived as not being sufficiently accessible to potential students. This is particularly so in the non-campus countries. In fact, as a proportion of the total, there has been a decrease in enrolment of non-campus country students.<sup>3</sup> It is an oft-aided complaint that the private cost of education at UWI is too high relative to that in North America, especially considering the limited opportunity for part-time work in all the campus countries. This has encouraged some students to enrol in universities outside the region. The increasing enrolment of Eastern Caribbean students at the University of the Virgin Islands is understandable in this light.

Accordingly, the Secretariat of OECS suggested that since the non-

campus countries can no longer afford to send their students to the UWI campuses, UWI could consider delivering its programmes to the non-campus countries 'particularly in conjunction with the emerging community colleges in the region, or provide other means of reducing costs for non-campus countries' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:27).

Another facet highlighted in discussions of accessibility with reference to UWI is its admission standards, which are considered to be inflexible in comparison with most North American universities: 'One aspect of this is the requirement of A-levels, which involves two years of post-O-level study. A-levels throughout the Caribbean have been relatively inefficient in that only about 30 per cent attain at one sitting the required two credits for university admission...In earlier discussion within UWI of the possible abolition of A-levels, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago, where the secondary system produces enough admission candidates with two passes, have always opposed it' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:18-19).

But when the number of candidates with the required A-levels far exceeds the available places at UWI,<sup>4</sup> one could hardly question its policy of selecting the 'best' candidates for the limited places available.

Evening classes in Arts and Social Sciences, introduced in 1963, have proved useful as a means of affordable university education. Their admission requirements are also flexible. However, these classes favour the campus countries and urban areas. Also, evening classes are available only for the first-year programme, and students are expected to join day classes beyond that, even if they are part-timers. There appears to be scope for extending evening classes further into the degree courses.

In 1978, UWI introduced 'The Challenge Examination Scheme' to allow suitably qualified students in the non-campus countries to pursue the first year of the B.Sc. degree course in the social sciences without having to attend classes on a campus. These students are provided structured classes, both on site and through distance education programmes, and have access to the library at the University (Extra-Mural) Centres. Furthermore, from time to time faculty members from the campus countries visit the non-campus countries for short lecture-discussion sessions.

Examining the issue of access, reference should be made to the University's Department of Extra-Mural Studies, which has put thousands of English-speaking Caribbeans in touch with higher education and has brought them the benefits of knowledge generated by the University's work. Dating

back to the beginning of the University, this Department has grown to be its major outreach arm. It has sought to (a) act as mediator between the UWI and member states; (b) act as the eyes and ears of the University in the territories served; (c) stimulate intellectual activity at a high level in the communities served; (d) facilitate the dissemination of new and existing knowledge to particular groups who could benefit from such in the NCCs (non-campus countries); (e) respond to development needs by drawing the University's attention to such needs or by facilitating problem-solving among the citizenry in areas of concern having to do with political, social and economic life (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:226).

An effective mechanism of access that has had considerable impact on the work of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies in some non-campus countries is the 'University of the West Indies Distance Teaching Experiment' (UWIDITE), that was initiated in 1982 with a USAID grant. Using telecommunications technology, it offers two categories of programmes: (a) those 'providing for formal university certification' and (b) those 'specially designed for particular groups of participants who receive certificates of participation' (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:228).

### **UWI and National Development**

UWI's academicians and administrators alike emphasize the contributions which the University researchers have made to the national development of campus as well as non-campus countries. For example, references are made to Research by the Faculty of Agriculture (into root crops, pasture and grain legume), the Faculty of Medicine (special health problems in small States in the Caribbean, community health care, health management and health development planning), the Faculty of Natural Sciences (pelagic fisheries of the Eastern Caribbean, status of fishing stocks in the Eastern Caribbean, environmental impact studies, e.g., volcanic activity (Soufriere in St. Vincent), marine biology, wind energy, solar agricultural drying with application to such crops as coffee, pimento, bananas, sorrel, cassava, etc., sugarcane products and by-products (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:238-9).

Nevertheless, there is a strong feeling in the non-campus countries that UWI is not sufficiently tuned to the development needs of the region. An institutional review of the University of the West Indies (see Loubser *et al.*, 1988:16) found this perception to be stronger in some countries than in others.



It also observed some variations in the specific respects in which UWI is seen to fall short. The university academics feel that, considering the diversity of the region, some gap between programmes and needs of the region is inescapable and the system takes time to adapt.

However, the way UWI has developed after the 1984 restructuring betrays the tendency of campus countries to develop along lines that suit their own national interests at the expense of regional advancement. An important factor which contributes to this is the increasing flow of bilateral aid, that is, from government to government. Applied to education, such aid has the long-term consequence of splintering regionality (see Pereira, 1984:15).

UWI has been fulfilling the traditional role of training of human resources, especially at the undergraduate level, reasonably well. Its graduates play a leading role in the region: they abound in positions in the professions and in public services and statutory bodies. However, brain drain has remained an intractable problem.<sup>5</sup> Those critical of UWI's teaching and research programmes feel that these programmes equip the students not for local conditions but for satisfying the needs of the developed countries.

### Funding and Resources

Funding for UWI's recurrent and some development expenditures come from 'contributing countries.' 'The countries contribute on the basis of a per student economic cost formula for each faculty at each campus, with a discount of 40 per cent for non-campus countries' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:viii). Obviously, there are variations in cost among faculties and campuses: the ratio for Mona to St. Augustine to Cave Hill is 1:2.0:2.3. The funds are distributed through a University Grants Committee and three Campus Grants Committees.

With the gradual increase in costs over the decades, most governments in non-campus countries have sought to limit their obligations. Since per-student cost is prohibitively high for individual students not sponsored by their governments or donors, access to UWI for the non-campus country students is becoming increasingly limited. This strikes at the heart of UWI as a regional institution. 'The separation of access by NCC students to UWI from the financing arrangements among the contributing governments is an urgent necessity,' the institutional review stressed, 'if UWI is to remain a regional university in any real sense' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:xiii).

Not only are the contributions from the participating governments

inadequate for funding recurrent and development budgets, but also the contributing countries are late in making their contributions. UWI attributes its financial problems largely to the fact that the contributing countries are in arrears.<sup>6</sup> The problem has become more acute as the emphasis on basic education for all has resulted in a reordering of education priorities by governments and a shift in the allocation of financial resources from higher to lower levels of the education system.

The financial constraints have had adverse consequences for the day-to-day functioning of UWI and hindered its development programmes. Several facilities have been curtailed: Staff positions have been frozen, library grants have been slashed and subscription to journals has been cut. UWI is finding it difficult to deliver even its routine services to the non-campus countries. And what is worse, recurrent cash-flow problems have affected the normal routines of UWI, as for instance, there has been holding up of mail for want of petty cash. All these inevitably weaken UWI's effectiveness as 'a regional institution and its ability to deliver high quality programmes to meet the needs of its contributing countries' (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:xiv).

For non-teaching projects and most capital development projects UWI has been depending on funds from international agencies and individual governments. For instance, over time, the St. Augustine Campus of the University has benefited from the contributions from national and international agencies. The assistance from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the European Development Fund, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), International Development Research (IDRC), Van Leer Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation, and Commonwealth Foundation are worth mentioning here.

However, there is also a criticism that often the institutional assistance extended by the international agencies is dysfunctional, and it is even dubbed 'garbage-can generosity.' For instance, Pereira (1984:11) draws attention to the case of research in Physics: 'For years, postgraduate students, for want of a higher degree, ended up in ionospheric research, largely because the Department had received surplus/obsolete equipment from the US. It remains to be seen where greater knowledge of the ionosphere has helped the region.'

### **Whither UWI?**

The persistent feeling that UWI is far too isolated from the local

communities where it is operating, and the perception that its regional character makes it too slow to respond to distinctly felt local needs have led to new directions in higher education among certain participating countries. The premise is that a national State-run institution could be brought more easily under governmental control than a regional university or its campus.

A wide range of tertiary institutions have come into existence in the region and most of them have forged links with European and North American universities which give credits for their courses more readily than UWI. The National Institute for Higher Education (Research, Science and Technology) (NIHERST) in Trinidad is an illustration. The idea of this Institute was first conceived in 1977 to coordinate all agencies (except UWI) involved in higher education, technological research, development and training in Trinidad and Tobago. This coordination was proposed because it was felt that NIHERST could meet the needs of the nation since UWI was either not geared to do this, or could do so only at extraordinary costs and substantial delays (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, 1977:18). The status of NIHERST was regularized with the passing of a Parliamentary Bill in June 1984.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these non-UWI institutions of higher education have already established a reputation for academic excellence.

Some Community Colleges now offer Associate Degrees in collaboration with North American universities. The College of Arts, Science, and Technology (CAST), now a member of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, offers degree programmes that are integrally linked with work force requirements (Caribbean Community, 1993:20).

Thus, UWI can no longer claim to be the sole custodian of academic excellence in the region, and a continuation of this trend is sure to lessen its influence there.

All this calls for a reassessment of the role of UWI within the total education system in the region. How well it responds and adapts to the emerging economic, social, political, technological and cultural realities in the region will determine its survival as a regional university.<sup>8</sup> After all, UWI is *sui generis*, 'a Caribbean invention in all its wearying, contentious, contradictory, tenacious diversity' (Sherlock and Nettleford, 1990:216).

## Notes

1. Three separate entries in *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education*, edited by Clark and Neave (1992), discuss the status and problems of higher education in these three

- campus-countries: A.Layne on Barbados (Pp.59-61), J.Halliwell on Jamaica (Pp.373-77), and M.James-Bryan on Trinidad and Tobago (Pp.730-39).
2. One may recall here that Guyana, pursuing its own national agenda, withdrew from UWI in 1962.
  3. The problem of access exists even within the campus countries. This is similar to the problem in secondary islands in multi-island states (St.Christopher and Nevis, Antigua and Barbuda) with reference to the service of the University Centre.
  4. The demand for places varies among campuses and faculties: the ratios to admission are as high as 5 to 1 in Medicine, 4 to 1 in Law, 3 to 1 in Social Science, and 1.5 to 1 in Natural Science (Loubser *et al.*, 1988:19).
  5. According to Eric Williams (the then Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago), during 1962-67. the United States of America received from the Commonwealth Caribbean 1,127 engineers, 388 natural scientists, 1,184 physicians and 1,733 nurses (quoted in Pereira, 1984:13). These numbers have evidently increased since then.
  6. It is reported that as in July 1993, Trinidad and Tobago owed TT \$ 281,016,54, Barbados owed BDS \$ 30,493,777, and Jamaica owed JA \$ 661,403,100 (*Daily Express*, Trinidad, 8 October, 1994, p.7).
  7. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has kept UWI and NIHERST under separate ministerial jurisdictions: While UWI falls under the purview of the Ministry of Education, NIHERST falls under the purview of the Ministry of Planning and Mobilization.
  8. The Chancellor's Commission on the Governance of UWI is a step in this direction (see University of the West Indies, 1994).

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