

Economic Growth and Transformation Conference Presentation -

Young Economists Perspectives on the Training of Economists in the Region.

Panelist: Chrystol Thomas (UWI, Cavehill)

Chairperson, Ms. Georgia McLeod, Dr Michael Witter – Chairman of the Organizing Committee, Ms Camilia Clarke – Conference Coordinator, specially invited guests and fellow panelists a pleasant good afternoon to all. My name is Chrystol Thomas, and it is my privilege to stand before you to relay the opinions of past and present students on how effective the Economics' curriculum is for aspiring economists at the Cave Hill campus. It is also my intention to identify and explain why few students opt to specialize in economics and to give recommendations on what Cave Hill and by extension the University of the West Indies can do to encourage more interest in this area of study.

The Cave Hill Campus, having been in existence for over 45 years, has been a catalyst for the exchange of information and for providing students with the basic skills needed in their area of study. The Economics Department, having been there from the inception, is known for its high standard of teaching and professional lecturers. However, in spite of this, there are indeed many areas where the Department can improve in order to teach students how to function effectively in the workplace. The structure of this paper firstly identifies the opportunities available to students, followed by the areas for improvement and finally to highlight some possible recommendations to help better the Department.

In the undergraduate program at Cave Hill, students can benefit from practical and lab sessions that help explain the dynamics of economic models, thus allowing them to generate a better understanding of the topic. Cave Hill also fosters an environment for empirical research, as some students are afforded the opportunity to work alongside lecturers in producing research papers, and making presentations at regional conferences. This approach definitely sets the pace for us (the students) not only to reinforce what has been taught but also to become more equipped and prepared for what is expected of us in the job market as aspiring economists.

As part of Cave Hill's curriculum, a number of seminars and workshops are organized to help develop the intellect of its students. The support from the Department has also encouraged enthusiastic students studying economics to form an economic group – Young Economist Association, Cave Hill Campus. This move has afforded students the opportunity to develop their oral and organizational skills. However, it must be noted that the participation rates are very low when compared to the number of students enrolled in the economics programme. Therefore, the students at Cave Hill need to become more interactive by partaking in various workshops and seminars that are hosted by the university, and clubs and/or association on economic issues. This approach will help generate creative minds as ideas can be formed through discussion thus making students more competitive in the labour market.

The Department also has a large number of final year electives, in which students can choose from. As such, students are better able to determine their preferred area of

specialization. The UWI, unlike other international universities, allows Economics' students the opportunity to take courses in Operations Research, which helps when doing graduate studies. Furthermore, Cave Hill's students are geared towards having a strong mathematical background as it is our belief that every economist needs to have a solid foundation in the basics of economic theory and econometrics.

Even though, the aforementioned benefits exist, the university's curriculum provides little exposure to current events and the economic history of the Caribbean. Though our current generation is leaving the institution with a sound theoretical understanding of economics, many are unable to apply this knowledge to the small open economies of the region. Therefore, we need to train these young, creative minds to think outside the box by linking theory with real world scenarios. Although one might argue that students should develop the initiative to self-educate themselves on these issues, we are faced with the reality that many undergraduate students do not yet hold a great passion for economics. Also, many economics students at Cave Hill are not familiar with great economists such as Sir Arthur Lewis, Lloyd Best, and George Beckford just to name a few. Therefore, the Department should make Caribbean economy (which is currently an elective that focuses on the history and contributions made to the Caribbean region) a core course that each economics student should undertake.

Another problem highlighted by many students is that the structure of the UWI is more geared towards passing exams instead of developing the mind to learn how to apply abstract concepts to the real world. Students also found that it was difficult to retain information after writing exams as it was quite easy for them to develop patterns from past

exam papers and prepare just enough work to facilitate the exams without having general knowledge of the course. Ladies and gentlemen, if this is so then we seriously need to investigate such and make quick amends through revising our curriculum and the style of our examinations.

Another area that the Economics Department needs to pay attention to is exposing students to the economic careers available. Many students are unaware of the different career paths that are available to economics majors. As such, many of the better students branch off into Accounting and Management after the completion of their undergraduate degree. The Department could therefore provide adequate information on job employment opportunities to encourage more students to enroll in economics.

More over, the Department of Economics can adopt other means to help prepare students fully for the world of work by emulating the co-op education programs of Carleton University in Canada. This program seeks to integrate periods of study with paid work placements. As such, students can benefit from the many opportunities to work with some of the most exciting enterprises in the country and by extension the region. Students can gain valuable hands-on skills related to their program while studying for their degree. It's also a great way to improve one's employment skills, enhance studies, and build an impressive résumé thus making students more marketable and better prepared as professionals. Such preparation would bring us on par with other international universities thus making us successful in the demanding world of the 21st century. Therefore UWI

should be more than an academic experience but a forum where you can be a part of social and cultural experiences.

Consequently, although the university does not provide many avenues for economics students to fully develop their potential it is the Alma Mata for some of our great economists and politicians such as the Honourable Owen Arthur, Clyde Mascoll, Professor Michael Howard, Professor Andrew Downes and many other economists in the private and public sectors. Therefore we need to be proud of what we have accomplished and ensure that we maintain our standards by putting the UWI on par with that of the renowned universities of the world.

Thank You!

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