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Our competitive advantage
Cave Hill, Barbados*

Let me welcome you to these graduation exercises of the Cave Hill campus of the University of the West Indies.

First, I must mention one important development in the governance of this campus. Sir Neville Nicholls has informed me that after 14 years as the Chair of the Campus Council he will be demitting that office. He has seen the tremendous growth of the campus and has been a constant source of good counsel and sound advice to at least two principals and two chancellors. I will miss him, as in addition to being valuable to and respected in the University, he has been my friend for sixty years. Let us thank him for his contribution and hope that if the occasion arises, we can call on him for support. Thank you Neville and our thanks also to your good lady!

There are several reasons which bring our audience here. For some it is to see relatives graduate, but I am sure that for many it is also because they have some stake in the institution and share our pride in what it does. We all have pride in our new graduates, none more so than the parents and loved ones of the graduates and our staff who see in this ceremony some of the fruits of their efforts. Your programs show the impressive list of graduates and I must congratulate the Principal, Sir Hilary Beckles and the staff on them.

This year there are 1362 graduates, of whom 249 are postgraduates and there were 65 first class honors among the undergraduates. We must thank the Government of Barbados for pledging BDS\$ 1million for academic year 2009/2010 and BDS\$ 3 million the following year to facilitate the provision of scholarships for full-time postgraduate work leading to the MPhil. I was impressed that there are some 172 majors taken, which shows the wide range of disciplines in which the University makes a contribution. There were 172 Law graduates, 132 with a major in Management Studies (special) and 108 in Accounting. These are clearly all areas of immediate relevance to Caribbean development.

There has been remarkable physical development of the campus recently and it is impressive to see the new administration building in the shape of the golden stool of the

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Ashanti sitting on the brow of the hill, a link with our past and an emblem of the organization of our future. A Medical Sciences building has been completed as phase one of the program for providing space for this new program and the Alister McIntyre Building is a recognition of the tremendous contribution Sir Alister has made to the University. Phase one of the upgrading of the Library has been completed.

There are some other developments of which we are proud. The Fields Report had recommended the formal introduction of an “evening university” and within this context “Cave Hill Evening” was introduced during Academic year 2009-2010. This parallel program delivers a number of heavily subscribed courses of study mounted between the hours of 5:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. and on weekends. Many well wishers so appreciate what is done here that they are willing to support us. The UWI and SAGICOR Ltd. signed a Memorandum of Understanding whereby SAGICOR agreed to make a financial contribution of BDS\$ 2,000,000 to the UWI in support of the establishment and continued development of the Teaching Complex, “The SAGICOR Centre for Lifelong Learning”. A Memorandum of Understanding was also signed with INNOTECH Services Ltd covering the development of a Masters Degree in Construction Management; and the establishment of a Centre for Construction Management which would deliver undergraduate and graduate degree programs. Under the MOU, INNOTECH would provide support for the Masters program through a contribution of BDS \$1 million. I wish to thank SAGICOR and INNOTECH and congratulate Sir Hilary and his staff on these developments.

The physical developments which you see represent important assets of the University, but we should note that they represent only one part of the assets which we possess and must leverage if we are to maintain a competitive advantage in this field of tertiary education which has been likened to an industry in which the major clients are governments and students.

The University leadership has to be concerned about maintaining a comparative advantage that is obvious and valuable to its main clients. Sixty years ago there were few options for tertiary education in the Caribbean. There was a thriving connection with academic centers through correspondence courses. Sixty years ago because of the organization of our societies, there was no question of the appropriateness of training small elite and by definition such training would be in a small elite institution.

But over those sixty years the academic landscape has changed dramatically. There now well over one hundred external or private providers of tertiary level education in the Caribbean and over one dozen “off shore” universities, mainly in the medical sciences and hundreds of affiliations between Caribbean institutions and foreign training centers. But naturally there are risks to unfettered growth of tertiary level education in our region and as a report by E.P. Brandon put it:

“There is a real danger that governments will allow the shape of tertiary education to slip from their control, or from the UWI’s control on their behalf, into a purely market-driven free-for-all.

This is a danger, since the quality of civil society and the level of debate it sustains is a function, not of demand driven training, but of the more disinterested pursuit of understanding one associates with the humanities and the pure sciences.”

But while our University might agree with those sentiments and work with governments to try at least to ensure quality in the several offerings being made, it must still face the challenge of obtaining and maintaining a competitive advantage in the current climate. Sentimentality and the recall of halcyon days by older graduates is not enough. The conviction in most circles that there is a need for an institution that gives intellectual heft to the regional integration effort through the production of regional public goods is necessary but not sufficient.

Our competitive advantage will come from the value that we create for our clients or our buyers which are essentially our governments and our students. The appropriate strategy to do this is by cost reduction or product differentiation. We do everything possible to reduce our costs, but we can never compete with the mega universities which are invading our shores. Phoenix University has an enrolment of about 450, 000 students and is in a position to effect the kinds of cost reductions that we cannot. However, we can be competitive because we can differentiate ourselves through our assets and the product we offer.

We can differentiate ourselves not only because of the physical assets to which I referred, but mainly because of our intangible assets and the most important of those intangible assets are our brand and our outstanding academic resources. Our brand creates images in the minds of people of all the expectations associated with what we do and who we are-it represents the sum of all our valuable qualities. Because we are a regional institution we must maintain a single brand although there may be some variation in the product we offer. The marketing of our product is facilitated by the strength of our brand.

The University's current Strategic Plan is a positive response to the challenge, and I must compliment the Vice-chancellor for the open and inclusive manner in which he engineered the process. One of the key enablers of the Plan is marketing and branding and a key strategy is to develop and implement a University wide Marketing and Communications Strategy that is focused on establishing the brand promise of UWI regionally and internationally, as the premier higher education institution in the region. This is essential, given the growing intensity of the competition from national and private higher education institutions in the region as I have mentioned.

But I wish particularly to emphasize the role you graduates can play in maintaining that competitive advantage. There is self interest on your part as since you will not wish the currency of your qualifications from this university to be debased I trust you will always believe in and proclaim the merits of your alma mater. Part of that brand which we have and which we are trying to strengthen in order to maintain a competitive advantage, as all good universities are now doing is through a strong relationship with you who are our newest alumni. You can be the living demonstration to your fellow

citizens and to the potential university students of what our brand signifies and I ask you not to take that responsibility lightly. I wish you good luck and a continuation of the process of learning which I trust was a part of your experience here.

Let me end by thanking your parents and loved ones for supporting you during your time here. I trust that they are satisfied with the product and perhaps can be part of the ever increasing numbers of persons who speak to the worth of our brand.