

George A. O. Alleyne
Chancellor
University of the West Indies
October 17, 2009

No end to beginnings
Saint Lucia*

Your Excellency Dame Pearlette Louisy, Governor General of St. Lucia,
GovernorsGeneral
Mr. Prime Minister,
Ministers of Government
Our honorary graduands
Members of the graduating class
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of all the University leadership and especially on behalf of the Vice-chancellor and the Chair of the campus Council, welcome to these first graduation exercises of the Open Campus of the University of the West Indies! Let me say how pleased we are to have them taking place here in St. Lucia –the Helen of the West, immortalized in verse by your own Walcott. My own satisfaction and pleasure at having this ceremony here is not only because of the beauty of the island, but also because it has had so much to do with the history of our institution. There is an obvious connection through the steady stream of distinguished citizens of St. Lucia and the other islands of the Eastern Caribbean studied or taught in the University and who wear the Pelican with pride. The presence of so many dignitaries and representatives from other islands and Belize emphasizes our geographical openness and our Caribbean wide connections. But the connection that I wish to emphasize this evening is through two of your more famous sons-the brothers Lewis. I am sure I will do the same when in future years our ceremony is held in other places.

This Open Campus represents the most recent major change in the structure and composition of the University. The year 2008-2009 was the transition and establishment year for the Campus after its official ratification by the University Council at its meeting on 27 May 2007. It has already meant a massive increase in the numbers of our students with an increase in program offerings at all levels, including two new Masters programs.

St. Lucia is connected with physical growth of the University through its first Vice-chancellor -Sir Arthur Lewis who presided over the first major expansion of the institution and whose philosophy of expansion finds echo with us today. It is to him and

* Presented at the Inaugural Graduation Ceremony for the Open Campus, UWI, Saint Lucia, October 17, 2009

his brother Sir Allen that I wish to pay special tribute today as we embark on another major change in how we do business in the University and I wish to pose their efforts in the context of the several “beginnings” we have and will have. I wish you new graduates to grasp the concept that there is for us no end to beginnings and I wish you to buy into that vision that for your alma mater the dawn of every new beginning such as this one will spell advantage for the people and lands of the Caribbean.

Sir Arthur’s vision of a University and its role in the life of the Caribbean can be seen clearly as he accepted the Chancellorship of the University of Guyana and his relevant comments then echo with me even now. Forty-two years ago he would say:

“Fifty years ago university training was for the handful-even in rich countries it was for one percent of the population or less. And, to the rulers of society it was something suspect. University education was thought to make a man unfit for practical tasks, at best: at worst it gave him dangerous thoughts. So it was a luxury for the very few, and preferably only for the few who were already on top. Nowadays, university training is seen as vital to the community, and colleges are exploding in numbers and expense. The change in social attitudes is spectacular”.

He would urge for the creation of a new class,

“pouring mostly out of the universities, into business and government and the professions and founding their power on their knowledge and skills and not on property”

In words that are prescient even today he spoke of the difficult times:

“And there is no easy passage through them. It is some consolation to know that they will pass; that the issues which divide us so bitterly today will seem trivial to our children, or at least our grandchildren. But we still have to live with them. It is of greater consolation to know that the way through is to multiply as rapidly as we can the number of people to whom they seem trivial today, and who will therefore use their influence today to create here and now the classless and raceless society”.

This philosophy of multiplying the numbers who had access to higher education took form in the expansion of the University to Trinidad and Tobago and to Barbados. The problems and tensions that attended the expansion that Sir Arthur engineered were many and it is a tribute to the maturity of our governments and our societies that the expansion has not been accompanied by dissolution or disintegration.

It was during one of those periods of tension within the University and intense questioning of the need for the institution and its relevance that another Lewis-Sir Allen became our second West Indian Chancellor and in a stirring and forthright installation

address he set out very clearly how the University should comport itself in the trying times of the seventies. He would emphasize the need for adherence to the basic purposes for which the University was created-

“provision of places of learning and research of the highest standard, the advancement of knowledge and the diffusion of the arts, sciences and learning”.

The advice he gave then is also pertinent to you graduates today. He would say:

“It is fashionable nowadays to question and even to reject old values and standards. Yet I am convinced that our scholars and students will find nothing to replace the traditional moral values of truth, honesty, courage, self-discipline and loyalty which have been the sure foundation of human progress throughout the ages. With knowledge as their armour, and these moral virtues as their shield our graduates can return to their native lands fully equipped to fight the battle for total development”.

For him there was no room for the moral relativism which has become so common. I can do no more than say amen to that charge.

The period of expansion which Sir Arthur initiated was spectacularly successful in terms of student numbers, but in time the feeling grew that there were members of our Caribbean family which were not participating as fully as they might in some aspects of the life of the University. In 2003 when I became Chancellor, I appointed a Task Force on Governance of the University which in its Report emphasized that the institution would lose its genuine regional character and become irrelevant as a Caribbean institution if it did not embrace more fully the 12 countries which did not have a full University presence. I must give great credit to ProVice-chancellor Lawrence Carrington and our Vice-Chancellor Nigel Harris for crafting and operationalizing the idea of an Open Campus that would embrace the whole Caribbean and ensure that all members of the family were well served. I should note its international projection as it has already gained international membership in the Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) at its recent 23rd International World Conference held this year in Maastricht, The Netherlands.

The arrangements to put this in place have obviously been very complex, and there were many doubters to be convinced. But the greatest credit and plaudits must go to the contributing countries, especially the UWI 12 who embraced the idea enthusiastically. Of course there are challenges. There are those of ensuring that the students in this campus are brothers and sisters and not cousins of those elsewhere. How can we through both symbols and substance imbue these students with a pelican pride as strong as that which still moves many of their predecessors who lived together, worked together and sometimes loved together? There is the challenge of ensuring the level of scholarship which should mark all university offerings. There are the obvious challenges of communication and funding. There is also the challenge of the relationship with the national tertiary institutions and here let me repeat what I have said on several occasions.

The University of the West Indies can not, must not and should not seek to deliver all the tertiary level training needed by the Caribbean. We can and will commit to assisting every country if asked, to develop its tertiary educational institutions, always pointing out that tertiary education is not confined to universities and in most developed countries, only a fraction of those in tertiary education are in universities. There is a natural thirst for tertiary education and most if not all of the Caribbean would be in agreement with the World Bank which said:

“There is growing evidence that tertiary education, through its role in empowering domestic constituencies, building institutions, and nurturing favorable regulatory frameworks and governance structures, is vital to a country’s efforts to increase social capital and to promote social cohesion, which is proving to be an important determinant of economic growth and development.”

I would note especially the separation of economic growth from development and that this is in addition to developing human capital..

I have emphasized to you new graduates that you have been part of an exciting new beginning. I have also pointed out that in our University there will be no end to beginnings. I cannot predict the nature of the next beginning. Because we are unlikely to move from where we are and how we are configured, I doubt that the next beginning will turn around our geography. Given the rapid and almost vertiginous changes that have taken place in the tertiary education landscape in recent years, I would guess that the new beginning will be in the nature of our organization or the thematic areas which we address. But whatever the nature of that beginning, I trust that the essential core of the University’s values and its commitment to Caribbean development broadly conceived will endure.

Let me end by thanking your parents and your loved ones who have supported you through the years. They deserve your thanks and applause. I trust that they are satisfied with what you have become because of your association with the university over some critical years.

I wish you well.