

BUSINESS DAY

Questions surround GATE funding for private institutions

By Natalie Briggs

The sun hung low over the quadrangle and the air was still. The combination was stifling for anyone sitting

under the tents and for the prospective students and parents who attended this UWI Open Day. There was music though, and the atmosphere was festive, even as the event wound down on the late Sunday afternoon Business Day visited.

We asked some attendees if they were concerned about how changes in the GATE programme would affect their schooling.

One parent was unaffected by the changes, at least for now. He has a daughter studying in Canada. Meanwhile, his son who is the second year of his IT degree is safe. As he started the programme before last year's changes, his degree will be fully funded until he finishes.

The parent was concerned about a younger daughter still in secondary school though. He thought his portion of the fees for her degree will be exorbitant. He doesn't remember

Minister Garcia breakdown of the parents' contribution under the new GATE system amounting to hundreds of dollars per month according to the degree, with totals of less than \$4,000 for most programmes.

Another parent looked wistfully around the campus. Even though he was there for his daughter, he told us he would have liked to have gone back to do a Master's programme. He can't though. He is now over the age limit for funding. They seemed to be in a minority, however.

"Most people didn't ask about GATE," said an administrative officer on duty for the afternoon shift, "I provided the information because it was there. But it didn't appear to be a concern."

But if funding does not yet appear to be a concern at public educational institutions, it certainly is at the private ones. When we last wrote about the GATE programme, we projected that the private institutions would feel the brunt of the cuts. We wrote:

"The first big losers are likely to be private tertiary institutions. Several of the private tertiary schools we

approached were reluctant to discuss their enrolment prior to GATE and after its introduction as well as their levels of profitability over the same period. However, some extrapolations can be made based on other information. Government expenditure for GATE has steadily increased over the past 10 years... From 472.8 million in financial year 2006/07, both the finance and education ministers have estimated that between \$650 and \$700 million has been spent on GATE every year since 2010.

Additionally, checks with the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago show that roughly over the same period, 81 institutions sought to be registered. An institution cannot be considered for GATE unless it is at least registered with ACTT. Documents on the Education Ministry's scholarship division page average that the cost of a post graduate degrees at a public tertiary institution is roughly \$70,000, the cost at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business, is around \$100,000 and the cost at other private institutions is around \$140,000, or

about twice that of the public schools. Even though undergrad degrees cost less, they are also more expensive at the private institutions owing to the fact that a number of them are foreign based.

"The above would indicate that over the past 10 years, private institutions have been receiving a handsome portion of GATE funding, although the figures do not show if they have been receiving more or less than public institutions."

We have subsequently been able to obtain figures for the cost to taxpayers of nationals' schooling at private tertiary institutions. From 2004 to 2015, the government has spent \$212,786,822 at private institutions, just slightly over half of the \$421,875,568 spent at public institutions. We also noted at the time that private institutions were likely to see significant reductions in GATE funding support because several of their degree programmes were not aligned to stated national skill priorities. It appears as though our projections were right, if reports coming out of the private tertiary education sector are any indication.

Business Day has sought interviews with executives at several of the country's leading private institutions, but again, as was the case last year, was unsuccessful.

Sources tell us, though that the situation is likely to be grim.

At one major institution, closure of

branches is already being considered in anticipation of lowered class numbers.

According to our sources, the GATE administration office of the Ministry of Education has signaled that funding will be cut "across the board" at private institutions. At another institution, the administration has signaled changes to lecturers' rosters. Previously, the lecturers were signed to a fixed contract over the school year. Now, they will be paid according to class numbers. One source told Business Day that the silence on the issue continues to be disturbing.

"The ministers aren't communicating with us at all," they said.

In turn, the schools aren't able to provide much information to current or prospective students.

"People need to know what's going on so that come 2017. Students need to be able to come in and be able to ask questions. And not be startled when they come in and find out that programmes they thought were funded are no longer and they will now be covered out of pocket," said the source.

Business Day attempted to reach the GATE Administration Office through its office numbers and email, however, we were unsuccessful in getting responses.

Next week, we explore the GATE issue further, as we attempt to contact the both the Minister of Education and the GATE Administration Office for an update on how the programme intends to treat with private institutions.