

# Misplaced row over UWI Chancellor

In recent days there has been a brouhaha about the selection of Robert Bermudez as Chancellor of The University of the West Indies. Part of the row had to do with the timing or protocol failure attending Education Minister Anthony Garcia's announcement of the appointment.

But in Selwyn Cudjoe's column we see another aspect of it, having to do with academic bona fides. Prof Cudjoe rushed quickly to the usual academic icons, Williams, Capildeo, James... the QRC firmament, and he interrogated Mr Bermudez against this history of excellence.

For a change, the university is at the centre of attention in public discourse, as questions are being raised about the Government's choice of Chancellor. I don't have a point of view on the merits of Mr Bermudez.

We hear the term "Chancellor" and we think this must be grand, and Prof Cudjoe asks what secondary school did he go to? You mean a man like this could run the whole university? Well, Prof Copeland is the principal of the campus and is running the university. And in my book you don't have to be a graduate of QRC to be bright. You could have gone to St Benedict's, or St Augustine Senior Comprehensive. There is this lingering bias in old guard academics like Prof Cudjoe, still beholden to colonial education values.

The chancellor is to the campus principal what the president of the country is to the prime minister.

For years Prof Courtenay Bartholomew criticised the selection process for entry into the Faculty of Medicine at Mt. Hope. The issue remains unresolved. UWI is deaf. This is from one of the most able men ever associated with the university, the person who helped realise the medical school, and who averted an AIDS crisis in the Caribbean. But when he saw untoward selection tendencies and raised a red flag, business went on as usual. My great colleague Dr Godfrey Martin, born and raised here but resident in England, could not get his daughter, who was born here, into Mt Hope to do medicine. Turned down, she was accepted in Cuba, and at Mona, and indeed at the University of Dublin, where she is now a second-year student.

The university is deaf to the question of racial discrimination. But equal access should be a value it holds up in every case. There might be need for mechanisms such as review boards where citizens whose children are denied places even when they meet basic requirements could appeal. It is blind to the fact that black males are missing on the campus.

There is also the question of the responsiveness of the university to the needs of citizens. Take the field of engineering, where UWI takes the traditional disciplinary approach and UTT takes one reflecting industry. There are aspects of the university course that require internships. These UTT graduates are more ready for the workplace than their UWI counter-

parts. In Jamaica, the University of Technology poses a major challenge to Mona because of programme creativity, and is more successful in attracting male students.

Another issue here is that The UWI has a tradition of treating failure as a measure of quality. I know an engineering student who did well at his A-Levels, and is as studious as they come, and he is failing in an engineering programme there. I know a second student who was failing and transferred to an engineering school in the US and is thriving. UWI St Augustine is a relatively small school, and lack of places might be a reason why many good students are not accepted or why students complain about the difficulty in some programme areas. Our entry level students in this country would gain acceptance in universities anywhere. It may be more than time for attention to be paid to expansion of university places.

The great strength of UWI is that at the stroke of independence it opened its doors, and the effects of this can be seen in every sphere of life here, from education to engineering to public service to law and to politics. But it is time to shift gears, and this might require a conversation with the citizenry.

There must be open public dialogue about ways in which university education needs to change here in the 21st century. There is need for new direction—new thinking



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about human talent. Maybe those who run universities here should be given sabbaticals to visit selected universities around the globe, to gain insights that could lead to change. When we take a young person in this country at age 18, who has come through the school system and done everything right, passing O and A Levels, we cannot then tell that person at the age of 20 or 21 that he/she is a failure. It is the system that is the failure. We need a university that can take that person and convert that talent positively to the benefit of us all. This small country cannot afford to be turning away talent that developed countries are only too happy to accommodate.

I hope that Mr Bermudez is a visionary who can raise questions that the academics have not thought about, especially with respect to wastage of talent. The university needs to resurrect the spirit of Dom Basil Matthews, the one educator we have had here for whom every talent was precious, someone who was willing to dispel the curse of the plantation and to see the potential in every citizen.

When you run a university by selecting the best and brightest students in the country, why are you still so beholden to the god of failure, not able to push every single one of those students to heights they would attain if only they could get an American student visa?