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## The UWI must rise to the challenge

A DECLINE in student applications to the St Augustine campus of The University of the West Indies (The UWI) was to be expected from the moment the State reduced tuition fees under GATE, the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses programme. After all, it was the introduction of free tuition that led to the explosion in student registration in the first place.

The link between affordability and tertiary education enrolment figures is well known. Three years ago, enrolment at The UWI's Cave Hill campus fell by a precipitous 35 per cent after the Barbados government decided it could only afford to pay the economic cost per student and not the full tuition fees.

With the stubborn refusal of oil prices to rise since late 2014, a similar fate was always on the cards for the St Augustine campus. Given this, one would have expected The UWI, above all else, to be prepared and not wait until faced with the fallout to act.

As the region's premier tertiary education institution, The UWI is an important resource in tackling the pressing problem of financing higher education. One would imagine it has the research and analytical capacity for the kind of scenario mapping and policy development required in such situations, as well as the academic objectivity, independence and confidence to advocate on behalf of its mandate to support regional development through higher education. What is not expected is that, faced with a worrying decline in student applications, The UWI hierarchy would resort to a knee-jerk proposal to lower academic entry requirements.

In saying so, this newspaper is by no means taking issue with the proposed new and lower academic criteria by themselves. Indeed, we have no particular basis for supporting the previous criteria either, having not had the benefit of a full exposition of how and why The UWI sets its entry requirements. While we have noted its recent argument for altering entry criteria as applied to the Certificate in Public Administration, we also note the request by various heads in the Faculty of Social Sciences for a lowering of the grade point average for entry into degree programmes. We note, too, that the proposal was made in direct response to a significant fall in entry applications to the faculty.

It is common knowledge that The UWI is under the financial gun, and several programmes face curtailment and even elimination due to lack of applicant interest. For staff, this carries its own consequences for staff reduction and other budgetary cuts.

However, while budgetary constraints are a fact of life, it must not be allowed to become the main determinant of The UWI's direction. A more productive outcome of its economic challenges would be for The UWI to seize this moment to introspect deeply and exercise its creative acumen for designing a tertiary education model that yields a richer learning experience out of less financial resources.

This is a moment for The UWI to lead the nation in thought and creativity. This opportunity would be wasted if its only response is the lowering of standards to make up numbers in order to keep the status quo intact.