

Speech presented to the 13th annual conference of the Joint Committee for Tertiary Education

**By Senator The Honourable
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Several changes have occurred on the local and international education landscape since your last conference: There has been increased awareness and sensitivity to the outputs of the system. This has led to the passing of the historic resolution in Parliament, and the establishment of a 10-man Education Review Task Force mandated by the Honourable Prime Minister to develop a strategic action plan for the system.

In addition, my colleague Minister, The Honourable Maxine Henry-Wilson has sought to promote dialogue among the Jamaican people through roundtable talks, to arrive at a shared national vision for the education system. These talks have concluded with 12 clear vision statements — representing the Jamaican people's vision of education — and a definition of who an educated Jamaican is.

Meanwhile, access to tertiary level education has increased through the expansion of programmes at community colleges; the influx of offshore universities — albeit those come with a new set of challenges — and the collaborative efforts of several teacher training colleges and other institutions to offer degree programmes in a range of disciplines. A year ago, the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME), seemed but a distant reality. Today, we are just months away from its implementation and this system brings with it several imperatives for the education sector, particularly the tertiary level where our graduates can be employed seamlessly, anywhere in the region.

While we are contending with these changes, there is the continued rapid explosion of knowledge and information, driven by rapid technological advances, facilitating cutting-edge research and development.

Fellow partners: It is these and other changing circumstances, which demand that we re-examine the national response to tertiary education. The canvas on which I have just painted the education landscape, raises some poignant questions, which have implications for the capabilities of the system.

- Can developing countries, such as Jamaica, compete in the knowledge economy, or do we face a future of increasing exclusion, unable to develop skills required for the 21st century?
- What is the role of higher education in supporting and enhancing the process of economic and social development?
- What approaches will we adopt in hurdling the obstacles that higher education faces in our country?

The answers to these questions are, in a sense, implicit in the theme you have chosen for your 13th annual conference — “Successful National Development through Private Sector and Tertiary Education Partnerships.” Your choice of theme also demonstrates an acute understanding of the need to adopt a multi-sectoral and collaborative approach to guarantee quality tertiary education, especially in an environment where this level is what I would call quasi-privatised.

Indeed, the choice of theme signals that you recognise that the capacity for Jamaica to adopt, disseminate, and maximise rapid technological advances depends on adequate systems of tertiary education. Similarly, improved and accessible tertiary education and effective national innovations systems can help a developing country, such as ours, to make progress toward sustainable achievements.

While not downplaying financial resources — for that is a stark reality — the challenges we face in higher education cannot be confined to financing only. There are gaps in the system in terms of equity, access and performance. However, I believe the most critical of all is curriculum development and implementation.

I say this because job creation and employment is one of the most critical problems facing countries worldwide, and education and training must be part of the solution to this problem. This has signalled the need to find a “connect” between the job market in a globalised community and the deliverables of the education system.

Therefore, tertiary programmes should be so structured to build the type of human resources needed for the Jamaican economy and to pay attention to the free movement of people and labour migration. The HEART Trust/NTA has illustrated this quite effectively.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture (MOEYC), is working to encourage better-quality outcomes from the tertiary education system and promote more

efficient institutions that innovate and respond positively to meaningful performance-based allocation of resources and accountability systems.

To achieve this, we need to forge productive partnerships with the private sector, trade unions, international funding agencies and international and regional educational institutions to plan and implement a range of education and training efforts.

The Honourable Maxine Henry-Wilson is committed to pursuing policy thinking that advancing purposeful strategies to shape partnerships and networks. We believe that the education system is not just the business of the Ministry, but the business of the nation.

We envisage, therefore, that strong partnerships will assist in building cutting-edge research and development expertise and capability. This will enable us to compete globally, through the effective use of our intellectual capital. Willing partners will help us to realise our goal of a first-class tertiary system, producing graduates whose employability is not in question; graduates who can assert themselves anywhere in the global village and compete with their counterparts in any so-called First World country.

Partnerships between institutions and with industry should also help to harness national expertise, achieve international excellence and deliver world-class value at home and overseas.

I congratulate the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ), and its vibrant product, the Joint Committee for Tertiary Education (JCTE), for creating a framework for the rationalisation of the tertiary education system and providing fora, such as these, through which partners can have dialogue and devise strategies to make the sector viable and relevant.

I commend you also for the qualifications framework to bring standardisation to the variety of qualifications offered in the tertiary system. This is a significant milestone in the development of quality assurance systems.

Over the years you have also pursued relentlessly and reaped a measure of success in the articulation of the tertiary system.

We thank you for supporting the efforts being made to improve tertiary education and for promoting excellence in education through several initiatives and programmes.

I hope we do not miss the significance of the JCTE boasting 13 years of solid achievements. I salute you and I almost want to encourage you: Don't stop the progress.

Indeed you have been a willing and worthy partner in the quest for quality, equitable and accessible tertiary education. So, as you deliberate today, I know that you will bring to the table suggestions on how to make partnerships work.

In concluding, let me just reiterate that the Government is striving towards a tertiary system that is outwardly focused on the world; one that is able to meet the developmental needs of our country and subsequently our Caribbean nations, yet one that remains distinctively Jamaican in style, content, tone and character.

This can only be achieved when willing partners work collaboratively and cooperatively; sharing one clear vision and striving towards one common goal; producing a strong nation.

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