



Strategic positioning and sustainability of community colleges through professional development

The following is a keynote presentation by the Minister of State, Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture, the Hon. Noel Monteith, to the Council of Community Colleges Annual Conference on January 4, 2005

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Significant changes have occurred in the education sector since your last conference and several more are anticipated within the next three years, starting this year. The increased awareness and sensitivity to the outputs of the education system and the demand for more and better from the system has stoked a positive response from the government and we now have a blue print for a transformation of education based on the diagnosis of the Education Task Force mandated by the Most Honourable Prime Minister last year.

The Rae Davis-led Task Force has come to grips with its mandate and has done a thorough job of not only diagnosing the ills of the system, but has subsequently prescribed reasonable and workable recommendations that should redound to greater efficiency and effectiveness. So we now have a shared national vision for education and a plan of action as recommended by the Task Force on how to realise this vision.

Access to tertiary level education has increased to over 15 per cent with many of the service providers being offshore universities, expecting and in some cases demanding the same treatment as our local institutions. This influx of offshore universities may seem to be a viable option in helping us to surpass our access target for tertiary education, but it brings with it serious implications for further quality assurance ethos, regulatory and monitoring mechanisms for Jamaica and the wider Caribbean...

A year ago, the Caribbean Single Market and Economy seemed but a distant reality. On February 19, we are having the signing ceremony to usher in this regional integration. The CSME brings with it, several imperatives for the education sector - particularly the tertiary level — where the migration of professionals and free movement of skills have signaled increased competition in a labour market where employability is a serious issue, especially among the age cohort 18-25.

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

We now have no choice but to be able to compete in an environment in which the knowledge based economies rival the producers of tradable goods. This will have far-reaching and immediate implications for how individual nation states such as ours think about schooling, the transmission of knowledge and the role of citizenship in modern society.

These issues and changes raise some questions, which have implications for the relevance and viability of community colleges. These are questions that you must ponder during the course of this conference:

- Wither the community colleges in light of globalisation?
- Can you compete in the knowledge economy or do you face a future of increasing exclusion, unable to develop skills required for the twenty-first century?
- What is the role of community colleges in supporting and enhancing the process of economic and social development in the Caribbean?
- What approaches will you adopt in hurdling the obstacles that impact your sustainability as an education service provider in a global village?
- In short, what are the imperatives for community colleges and how will you prepare yourselves to remain relevant and subsequently sustainable in this borderless society?

Your theme suggests that you think you ought to position yourselves strategically through professional development.

I lend you a few more suggestions:

Strategic positioning implies moving from where you are now and strategically relocating yourself, but doing so relative to others. You re-position because you recognize that where you are is an unsustainable place, given where you need to go and given a changing landscape.

If the Honorable Minister were here she would tell you that you cannot reposition by keeping your old position and defying anyone to even examine new postures and relationships. It is a contradiction in terms and in reality.

Strategic positioning means examining new options — even some that are not yet a part of your wildest imagination. Strategic positioning means openness. It means grasping the best mix of solutions to achieve the new product. (HMOEY&C)

Strategic positioning will involve a process: The first step is to identify and neutralise threats in your environment by tapping into the opportunities that technology and globalisation have brought with them. And by environment I do not just mean your immediate or local environment but the global environment.

This will require that you know what your strengths are; know how to maintain those strengths even while attempting to gain competitive advantage, by tapping into opportunities, providing quality service and producing the desired product.

Strategic positioning also requires you to assess your relevance in light of new trends in education and in light of a borderless society with emphasis on quality service. In this context

you may need to consider whether to re-visit your vision and in so doing broaden your role in order to maintain relevance?

The next step therefore is to formulate a strategy that will chart the way for realising your vision and stated objectives. Your viability and sustainability rest heavily on the strategy you formulate and implement... I am suggesting that this strategy, while not precluding professional development should not be limited to it.

The strategy you develop must therefore involve re-imagining your colleges as viable tertiary institutions and I say this because perception is very often more powerful than reality...

The reality is you are positioned precariously as tertiary institutions. The perception that militates against you is that your status in the education system has not been strongly or clearly defined. There are those that perceive you as post secondary or halfway houses between secondary and tertiary, while others perceive you as pre-university but not quite tertiary institutions. I believe you have rightly positioned yourself as tertiary institutions.

In so doing, you are providing courses and services that articulate with other tertiary institutions. As tertiary institutions, you must also be responsible for national development through the provision of requisite skills to satisfy the job market. Simply put, if you position yourselves as tertiary institutions then the imperative of creating an employable workforce is yours as well as the universities...

This is a position that you have to strengthen through public education campaigns, a strategic and comprehensive communication and public relations programme in order to maximise awareness of who you are and what you are about...

You also need to determine whether you will develop human resources for the job market locally and regionally or provide courses that either articulate or matriculate with existing universities or do both. You must also consider the implications of both options in terms of your capacity, viability and sustainability.

To position yourself strategically also requires a definition of the product you want to provide. In this case, it must be an educated Jamaican whose employability is not in contention anywhere in this global village.

Part of your responsibility should focus on:

- Enhancing the levels of educational achievement and improving performance.
- Creating citizens committed to lifelong learning by expanding your opportunities.
- Creating citizens equipped with education and competencies to compete globally by increasing exponentially the number of our working-age citizens with internationally recognised certification

- Ensuring that all learners recognize their full potential given their unique abilities.

All this is implicit and in some instances explicit in your Vision Statement with stated goals to be achieved by the year 2010. This vision statement resonates strongly with the shared national vision for education and tells me that you have made a quantum leap in the right direction.

In formulating your strategy, you should consider developing strategic linkages and relationships with those that ironically pose a threat to your sustainability. I refer to offshore universities and colleges, which compete with you annually for your share of the students leaving secondary institutions.

Walk with me down this path for a few minutes: The Task Force has made three critical recommendations regarding professional development and qualification of teachers.

The first requires that the Ministry outsource in-service and professional activities for its over 22,000 teachers. The second requires that all teachers be upgraded to degree status and the third hinges on the first two — licensing of all teachers.

Consider how you can play a role in facilitating these processes without assuming the core business of the teacher training colleges: With only 20 per cent of our teachers having degrees, there is bound to be a backlog in upgrading over 17,000, which forms the remaining 80 per cent. These have to be brought up to speed in terms of content. I surmise that the teacher training colleges will have to be rationalised into degree granting institutions to help facilitate this process. Even when that happens, logistically the universities and all our tertiary institutions do not have the resources and capacity on all their campuses across the island to accommodate the many teachers who would need to upgrade.

You must therefore strengthen your capacities so that you can tap into this opportunity by offering both your facilities at a cost as training spaces as well as your professional expertise to help provide content in key disciplines. The offshore universities may become extremely favourable in providing this service, if you do not position yourself to provide it.

You must consider forging linkages with them in areas where they have the strength in providing off-the-shelf or already packaged training programmes and areas where you have the strength in providing the space as well as the expertise in customising and delivering the training.

Consider the ongoing skills, which are not provided by teacher training colleges that teachers will need for continued professional development to facilitate re-licensing and start developing your curricular offerings to close this gap. Consider the professional and technical courses you can provide for in-service training of teachers and cultivate strong relationships with the training colleges in terms of providing these courses on and off the job.

Your strategy must therefore emphasize curriculum development even as it focuses on delivery. 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 signaled the need to find a “connect” between the job market in a globalised community and the deliverables of the education system.

Therefore, your 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. HEART/NTA has illustrated this quite effectively. Assess your relationship with the HEART/NTA and partner with them in the provision of certain technical and vocational courses and accompanying certification for job creation and employment.

The building of linkages between our tertiary educational institutions and the more effective management of our regional institutions are particular areas in need of urgent attention, but more importantly interconnectivity through information and communication technologies must facilitate the linkages as well as the sharing of resources.

Therefore, we must join hands and work together, in order to realise the concept of wall-less classrooms and or conference rooms. It is necessary that we develop these new relationships and environments to enable the facilitation of meaningful knowledge sharing with other institutions and organisations across the globe.

The University of Technology recently launched the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) centre. This allows them to communicate with other partner institutions, anywhere in the world, more quickly and more cost-effectively and also use interactive distance learning techniques for development.

This centre provides new and more appropriate opportunities for sharing information via audio-visual and satellite-driven global communication systems. Community colleges must tap into this centre which will open a window to available distance learning technologies and methods, which allow for video-conferencing and web-based learning, thus enabling knowledge sharing, dialogue, training and consultations on development topics.

UWI Wireless Area Network

In formulating your strategy you must also consider carving out niche markets based on your geographic location: Those of you located in and near tourism resorts for example must consider providing the skills necessary for the development of the tourism product. The Spanish hotel chains alone are building 13 new hotels with 5, 000 new rooms creating 10, 000 new jobs. Then there is the Harmony Cove Project announced by the Prime Minister with four five-star hotels including a 1, 000-room facility, and the Cinnamon Hill Development, underway in Rose Hall that will see the construction of hotel rooms villas and shopping villages.

All these developments will need quality workforce with requisite skills. We should not be found wanting and the jobs should not be given to others elsewhere because we cannot provide the well trained; well certified workforce to fill the positions.

The challenge to community colleges in these areas is to develop relevant courses for these areas and to court these organisations for funding, while you provide them with the needed skills for their organisations.

(Those colleges located near Bauxite industries; agriculture etc must provide skills for those areas)

At this juncture, I must commend you for taking your mandate seriously. Many of you have created extra-mural campuses and are offering several new and innovative outreach options; taking education to the people where they are. This will augur very well for your sustainability.

Your strategy must also include forging solid and 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 Ministry is committed to pursuing policy thinking that advances purposeful strategies to shape partnerships and networks. We believe that the education system is not just the business of the Ministry, but also the business of the nation. The Task Force has also emphasized full stakeholder participation in education.

We envisage therefore that strong partnerships will assist in building cutting edge research and development expertise and capability. This, ladies and gentlemen will enable us to compete globally, through the effective use of our intellectual capital. 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.

In view of all I have said before, I sincerely hope it is clear to us that the strategy you formulate for your development and sustainability can hardly be the same as those, which have added very little value before. Such strategies as we may design now must account for the need for employability, quality and relevance in the context of such open vulnerability to forces, which threaten your capacity building and sustainability.

Moreover your strategy must take fully into account the fundamental reality that the service you provide as community colleges must be so provided in a knowledge-driven technologically sophisticated global system and that the strategy you adopt must be pursued within the context of a knowledge economy. In short, the building of a knowledge system must be at the heart of any sustainable strategy for the community colleges.

Your organisation must continue to be one in which people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free. (Peter Senge, 2000)

I leave you with a thought from one of our change masters: Rosabeth Moss Kanter says, “The future will belong to those who embrace the potential of wider opportunities, but recognising the realities of more constrained resources — and find new solutions that permit doing more with less.”

I sincerely hope that this will be the essence of your deliberations throughout this conference.

God Bless