

Published Opinion Article by Prof. Paul Golding: 'Asking UTech to concentrate on STEM tantamount to economic suicide'

UTech, Jamaica Broadcaster

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The University Community is invited to read the article below published in The Gleaner on Sunday, May 14, 2023, titled, 'Asking UTech to concentrate on STEM tantamount to economic suicide' by Professor Paul Golding, Professor of Management and Information Systems, COBAM.



Paul Golding | Asking UTech to concentrate on STEM tantamount to economic suicide

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University of Technology, Jamaica

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There are two points from Sunday, May 7, The Gleaner editorial 'Overhauling University of Technology', on which I would like to expound upon.

The first is governance. The University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech) Act mentions three main positions: chancellor, pro-chancellor, and president. It says: "There shall be a Chancellor who shall be the Head of the University." The act does not specify that this is a ceremonial position, however, the act clearly specifies the power of the chancellor. "The Chancellor shall have power to confer degrees, diplomas, certificates and other academic, distinctions and awards." So although the chancellor is the head of the university, his/her powers are prescribed and unambiguous.

The second post is pro-chancellor who shall subject to the Charter, preside over the meetings of the Council (like a board of directors) . In addition: in the absence of a Chancellor or during a vacancy shall exercise and perform all the functions and duties of the Chancellor except conferring degrees and awards, etc.

The third major position is that of president. According to the Act the President: shall be the chief academic and administrative officer and shall preside over the meetings of the Academic Board. The Act continues: In the absence of a Chancellor or during a vacancy, the President shall have the power to confer degree, awards etc.

This structure clearly outlines the role of the top three positions. Currently the pro-chancellor position has been vacant since 2022 and the president since early 2020. While both positions are important, the key position is president who has the great responsibility to oversee the university's faculty and student body, including the financial status and general being of the university, akin to that of a chief executive officer. It is a travesty that this position has been vacant for so long. The inept reason given for the delay is the outbreak of COVID-19. You may recall that there was a general election in September 2020.

The council is responsible for the appointment of both the pro-chancellor and the president. **The Gleaner** has opined that during the vacancy of the pro-chancellor, the chancellor should "give the widest legal interpretation to the powers of the chancellor. In other words, UTech's chancellorship, in this period, should not be a ceremonial position but an activist's job." The editorial continues: "Mr. Carney (Chancellor) can convene as many meetings of the council as he wishes and re-engineer the body as the key instrument of policy, strategy, and tactics. He can have it amend the statutes to rebalance the centres of power."

ILL-CONCEIVED

These recommendations are all ill-conceived. The chancellor has the power to award degrees, etc. In my view, this power is not subject to interpretation. The recommendation of re-engineering the council as a key policy instrument is its role. However, in the past, presidents with strong personalities have manipulated the proper functioning of council. If the chancellor continues to chair the council, his position is conflicted as this is the body responsible for the appointment of the pro-chancellor. Instead, the chancellor should, in his next meeting of the council, elect an acting pro-chancellor from among the external council members and implore them to appoint a permanent pro-chancellor post haste. More importantly, the position of president must be filled as soon as possible. This newspaper indicated that a particular person was recommended, but negotiations broke down over remuneration. If this person is the ideal candidate, the university should reopen negotiations with the candidate, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance to make a better offer. The protracted delay in appointing a president has resulted in inertia at the university and a negative atmosphere.

I agree with **The Gleaner** that the chancellor should be an activist but not by contravening the governance structure, which that body has the responsibility to uphold – irony of ironies. The activist chancellor should, inter alia, be an advocate for the university and provide support for fundraising.

The second point raised by the editorial appears contradictory: "That is why this newspaper looks forward to his plans for transforming UTech – taking it back to core as a polytechnic university – and his timelines for doing so." To support the position of overhauling, or repositioning UTech, this paper states that "38 per cent of students are enrolled in business and management courses ... less than 60 per cent of UTech students study science and technology." The editorial continues: Re-establishing UTech as an elite polytechnic will require dismantling some of the newish faculties."

Establishing context. The UTech has eight faculties/colleges. Of the eight, five are science- and technology-related. There are four "newish" College/Faculties and only the Faculty of Law is not science- and technology-related. This is a small faculty.

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM

It is important that I explain to **The Gleaner** and others who have a similar view on how the UTech should be transformed. At the UTech, we strive to design a comprehensive curriculum that accounts for the needs and expectations of the students, the current trends and advances in the field, and the skills required for the job market. These curricula are market driven and receive significant input from industry experts and past students in their respective fields.

Let us now look at where the market demand is for our students. The major industries in Jamaica are agriculture, mining, manufacture, construction, financial and insurance services, tourism, and telecommunications. The labour force, by occupation, is agriculture - 16.1 per cent; industry - 16 per cent; and services- 67.9 per cent. On the supply side, I will use quotes from **The Gleaner** editorial: Only 28 per cent of students who write the Caribbean Secondary Education Schools Certificate (CSEC) pass five subjects, including math and English, at a single sitting. Less than 40 per cent pass math. Additionally, fewer than two of 10 the relevant cohort are enrolled in tertiary education, and fewer still sign up for

science or technology courses. The island is short of technical skills. Seven in 10 Jamaicans are not trained for their jobs.

The Jamaican economy, as it is currently structured, does not have the absorptive capacity for a high output of persons in science and technology nor are the high schools supplying the students with these skills to the universities. Asking the UTech to concentrate on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) is tantamount to economic suicide – there is low demand and low supply. This is the contradiction in **The Gleaner's** argument proposing that the UTech concentrate on unsustainable demand. It is even more important that a market-driven approach be maintained with the anaemic funding that the university receives from the Government.

This is not to suggest that the UTech is not in need of transformation, especially with all the changes since the pandemic, however, **The Gleaner**-proposed approach is parochial. There needs to be a long-term re-engineer of our economy to promote outward-driven growth and development. This will be contingent upon, inter alia, focusing on strategic industries (these could be creative), perceived to have significant potential for generating beneficial externalities for the economy, educational policies to support these industries, strong social consensus to achieve growth, improved productivity, and a well-functioning and efficient transport system.

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