

UWI TERTIARY LEVEL INSTITUTIONS UNIT

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REPORT OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FOCUS GROUP WORKSHOP HELD AT THE UWI
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND THE CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL JUNE 27-29, 2005

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- (2) printed and distributed.

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The Introduction

The University of the West Indies Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (TLIU) has developed and implemented a project to assess the human resource development needs of CARICOM countries. The project was conceptualized to identify regional socio-economic development goals; identify jobs and skills needed for the future development of the CARICOM countries; assess current and projected demands for tertiary education and training; determine the gaps between current education programmes and future programme needs and propose how they should be addressed. The project also emphasizes partnerships among development stakeholders: education providers (private and public), employers (public and private), government policy makers, students (potential/prospective and present), labour organizations (Trade Unions and Workers Associations) and Professional associations. Ultimately, the project will establish priorities and propose strategies to advance regional development through tertiary education.

The project has two major components: Focus Groups and a survey. This is the report of the second focus-group activity conducted in Trinidad and Tobago, June 27-29, 2005. The Focus Group provides a forum for knowledgeable experts from among the major stakeholders (education providers, employers, policy makers, students, labour organizations, professional associations) to prioritize identified needs and tertiary education response using an adaptation of the “**Delphi Technique**”.

The Objective

The purpose of the project is to provide information that should inform policy and establish priorities in relation to the advancement of a fully integrated tertiary education sector and the formulation of a human resource development strategy for the region. Specifically this activity will:

1. identify jobs and skills needed for the future national and regional development;
2. determine the tertiary education needs of individual countries and region;
3. determine the nature, scope and level of the region's tertiary education provision; and
4. establish the gaps between existing supply and demand in the tertiary education provision.

The Delphi Technique

The Delphi Technique (modified) was the method used in the focus group activity. This technique originated at the Rand Corporation (Dalkey and Helmer) for the purposes of technological forecasting and futuristic opinion gathering. It is now an important methodology in industrial decision making, educational planning and quality of life studies. The technique uses a panel of experts to analyze situations and issues with a view to proposing prioritized alternative scenarios to address and improve the issues and situations. Further, it is used in forecasting, futurist opinion gathering, establishing importance and strategies for action.

The technique is predicated on anonymity, through the use of questionnaires and statistical group response. The systematic procedures are intended to ensure some level of objectivity in the outcomes of the exercise. Further, the procedure is conducted as a sequence of rounds with the results of previous rounds being fed back to participants; it also ensures summarized group results, and enables flexibility in its execution.

The Procedure

The procedural steps used in conducting the focus groups were as follows:

1. A stakeholder specific questionnaire, composed of five open-ended questions, was administered to a purposive sample of stakeholders (employers, tertiary education providers, students, labour organizations and professional associations).
2. Completed questionnaires were returned to the TLI Unit where the responses were analyzed and master lists of responses prepared.
3. At the Focus Group sessions, the master lists of responses were given to the participants to determine the major needs, issues and concerns and to rank/prioritize them.
4. The ranking of the responses was conducted a number of times until consensus was reached.
5. The TLI Unit analyzed and reported the findings of the focus groups.

Discussion

Jobs and Skills

Table 1 compares the top five rankings of the jobs and skills identified by the three stakeholder groups (students, employers and provider – UWI and others). An analysis of responses to question 1 (jobs and skills needed to drive the country's development) revealed a number of common jobs and skills: Education/Teaching, Engineering, Information Technology, Management, Energy, Agriculture and social areas – Social Work, Hospitality and Criminology. Unlike the other groups, the students and UWI providers included health professionals and medical sciences in their top five rankings.

Table 1: Comparison of Stakeholders Top Five Rankings of Question 1 Responses:

Stakeholders		
Rank	Students	Employers
1	Teaching/Education; IT	Information Technology (IT)
2		Oil & Gas (Energy Resources); Management
3	Health Professionals	
4	Hospitality Workers	Engineering
5	Criminologists	Hospitality
Rank	UWI Providers	Other TLI Providers
1	Medical Sciences	Education/Teaching
2	Education/Teaching	Basic Skills
3	Agriculturalists/Farmers	Management; IT
4	Applied Sciences	Engineering
5	Engineering	Social Work

Employers ranked management and information technology very high. This may be a result of the global market forces that currently drive development and the ever increasing need to use technology on a daily basis in all work situations. Also in the work place employers seemed to be observing an inadequacy in management skills.

Agriculturalists and farmers were ranked in the top five by only the UWI providers group. In the discussion, this group seemed more cognizant of the importance of food security to the continual development of the country in particular and the region in general. Further, the UWI providers seemed more aware of the potential of this sector for general employment through agri-business and manufacturing. For these reasons agriculture must continue to be emphasized.

The students ranked the need for criminologists and the TLI's ranked the need for social workers in their top five. This is significant because the TLIs have introduced social and criminal justice programmes to address some of the social and criminal problems in the society that could negatively impact national stability and all revenue generating sectors. It was felt that small developing nation states cannot afford to allow their crime rates to spiral out of control since it only takes one adverse advisory from large developed countries to erode a country's economic base.

Types of Education and Training

All the groups recognized the importance of the development of the human resource and ranked Education, Human Development or Skills development as number 1. Energy and or Engineering appeared in the top five of all groups except students, not unusual in the context of Trinidad and Tobago with an oil based economy. Medical and Allied Health appeared in the top five for students and UWI providers and Hospitality ranked in the top five by students and employers. Employers tended to be focusing on training areas for immediate employment; the others seemed to be more concerned with areas promoting long-term and less specialized development.

Table 2: Comparison of Stakeholders Top Five Rankings of Question 2 Responses:

Rank	Students	Employers
1	Education/Teacher Education	Gas & Oil; Human Development
2	Behavioural Science/ Criminology	
3	Medical & Allied Health	Hospitality
4	Hospitality & HR Management	Engineering
5	Information Technology	Management
Rank	UWI Providers	Other TLI Providers
1	Education	Skills (Development)
2	Applied Sciences	Education
3	Engineering; Medical Sciences	Management
4		Social Work
5	Entrepreneurship	Engineering

The UWI providers included training for medical services personnel and entrepreneurs among their top five rankings. The development of an entrepreneurial spirit may prove to be one of the most critical factors in the region's future development. It is surprising and revealing that the student group, in this 21st century, failed to rank entrepreneurship in their top five. This suggests that the region's youth may still view themselves as acquiring an education and going to work for someone else.

Again the TLI group ranked training of social workers in their top five and they were the only group to place a priority on this training.

Levels of Education and Training

Responses to question 3 (Level of education required to satisfy the job and skill needs) were addressed by all stakeholders. All three groups ranked bachelors and graduate degrees among their top five. This suggested that while recognizing a place for all levels of education and training, the Bachelor’s degree is seen as the acceptable base for international competitiveness and that the region’s human resources need to be highly skilled.

Table 3: Comparison of Stakeholders Top Five Rankings of Question 3 Responses:

Rank	Students	Employers
1	Evaluated Experience	Postgraduate Degrees (MBA)
2	Bachelor Degrees	Bachelor Degrees
3	Postgraduate Degrees	Internships/On-the-Job-Training
4	Short Courses/Workshops	Diplomas; Certificates
5	Associate Degrees	Short Courses/Workshops
Rank		Other TLI Providers
1		Bachelor Degrees
2		Graduate Degrees
3		OTJ Training/Coaching/Apprentice-ship
4		Associate Degrees
5		Seminars/Short Courses/Workshops

Students, employers and the TLI personnel ranked short courses, workshops and on the job training in the top five. This was based on the fact that short courses, workshops and on the job training represent specific and quick training that addresses identified needs. The training can be intense and specialized and it allows all parties to benefit. Participants can acquire skills in a short period of time and employers are ensured a trained workforce.

The fact that the employers group ranked internships and on the job training so highly indicates that although they would prefer their work force to be highly qualified they also recognize the value of hands on experience.

Students' Reasons for Attending or Not Attending a Tertiary Level Educational Institution

The student focus group ranked personal development as the number one reason for attending a tertiary level educational institution. The value of tertiary education to the student is predicated on self-interest and pragmatism. The perception is that with a tertiary education one would be more marketable and employable. This would translate into procuring a job with greater satisfaction and possibly pay. Although salary considerations were important this group also ranked interest in the field, financial independence and changing work environment among the top five reasons for tertiary education. This indicates that if their interest is captured the students will participate in the programmes offered.

Generally the students perceived that the programmes offered were meeting their needs. Some students thought they had gained knowledge and skills, the programmes had helped them to become more analytical and they had gained much practical experience. However, other students felt that the quality of the teaching was not satisfactory and that they had missed out on some practical experience.

The student focus group when required to rank the top five reasons for others not attending a tertiary educational institution ranked finance, lack of entry requirements, lack of transferability, lack of appropriate institution, and career guidance and motivation as their top five. Finance was the number one reason and this was the identical trend when the other three groups identified barriers to tertiary level education.

Barriers to Participating in Tertiary Education

Question four for the three other focus groups differed from question four for students. These three groups were required to identify barriers to employers providing and facilitating education and training programmes for employees. Each of the groups ranked budget and financial constraints among their top five. What is even more significant is that they all ranked it as the number one barrier.

Table 4: Comparison of Stakeholders Top Five Rankings of Question 4 Responses (Barriers):

Rank	Employers	UWI Providers
1	Cost constraint/Budget	Finance
2	Benefits of Training	Access
3	Relevance of offering/programmes	Entry Requirements
4	Employees Attitude	Relevant Programmes
5	Job Demands	Distance of Programme
Rank		Other TLI Providers
1		Financial Assistance; Opportunity to participate in Tertiary Education
2		
3		Readiness for Tertiary Education
4		Lack of motivation/Apathy
5		Programme Quality

Both the employers and the UWI providers ranked relevance of offerings and type of programmes in their top five. This is a persistent complaint of employers that programmes are not congruent with the needs of the work situation.

The employers and the TLI personnel ranked attitude of employees, entry requirements and readiness for tertiary level education as major barriers. It is noteworthy that all of these relate to shortcomings on the part of the employees. Only the employers ranked the demands of the job as a barrier to tertiary level education. The UWI providers were the only focus group ranking a lack of distance education, flexible or blended learning among their top five barriers.

Overcoming Barriers

Since all three groups-employers,UWI providers and Other providers had identified finance as the number one barrier to tertiary level education for employees, it was not surprising that all three groups alluded to adequate finance as one of the ways to overcome the barriers. Additionally, two of these stakeholders suggested incentives for employees who pursued tertiary education. Most incentives have a monetary component attached to them and this will result in a further financial strain on employers.

Table 5: Comparison of Stakeholders Top Five Rankings of Question 5 Responses (Overcoming Barriers):

Rank	Employers	UWI Personnel
1	Collaborative Planning	Finance
2	Financial Assistance	Relevant Programmes
3	Adequate staffing to allow for release	Distance Education; Increased Access
4	Employees' Reward	
5	Information on programme offerings	Entry Requirements
Rank		Other TLI Providers
1		Quality Assurance
2		Proper preparation for Tertiary Education
3		Financial Support
4		Solution for relevant programmes; Decentralised/Flexible Delivery
5		

Two focus groups (UWI providers and Other providers) suggested adequate preparation for tertiary education so that more persons met the entry requirements. This could increase the number of persons pursuing tertiary level education.

The two tertiary education provider groups (UWI and Others) suggested decentralized flexible delivery to minimize some of the barriers to tertiary education.

It is interesting that the employers' focus group suggested collaborative planning as a way to overcome some of the barriers. This is extremely important because none of these stakeholder groups should be operating in isolation from each other. Their efforts are all for the development of the country and region and they are all dependent on the same consumers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is interesting to note that there was no widespread difference of opinions among the various stakeholder groups with respect to national socio-economic development goals and the jobs and skill (Information Technology, Energy Resources, Education/Teaching, Engineering, Health/Allied Health, Hospitality, Agriculture and other Social Areas – Social Work and Criminology) necessary for future development. What may have differed slightly was where the greater emphasis should be placed in charting a future development course for the country.

Clearly, the various stakeholders need to secure avenues of financial assistance to enable the establishment and maintenance of some of the programmes identified for future development. Since all stakeholder groups are identifying finance as the major barrier to education and training necessary for any further development of human resources, it is imperative that strategies and initiatives be devised to overcome this particular barrier.

It is also apparent that the country has to continue to instill in its youth the importance of agriculture to national development. Also, how critical it is for entrepreneurship to develop and flourish in this liberal and global economic environment.

The following recommendations, although not exhaustive, would be some of the areas requiring immediate attention:

1. Emphasis should be placed on occupational areas such as Education, Energy Resources, Engineering, Information Technology, Management, Medical and Allied Health, Agriculture, Social Work, Criminology and Hospitality.
2. Training should be promoted in Social Disciplines (Education, Management, Social Work, Criminology and Hospitality), as well as Energy, Engineering and Technology, and Medicine and Allied Health. Agri-business and Soft Skills.
3. Emphasis should be placed on training at all levels including internships and on-the-job (OTJ), and, given the ethos of globalization and liberalization, every effort should be made to make the Bachelor's degree the minimum or entry level qualification in many disciplines.

4. Tertiary level institutions (TLIs) should conduct research to determine the market needs and interest for any programmes they intend to offer. They also need to be more aggressive in marketing their programmes.
5. Tertiary level education (TLI) providers must attempt to develop and nurture an entrepreneurial spirit in the nation's youth.
6. Tertiary institutions should offer more college preparatory/access courses and create alternative pathways to increase access, i.e., allow more persons to meet matriculation/entry requirements.
7. A method should be devised for certification across national/regional institutions to facilitate the transfer of credits from one institution to another.
8. Greater incentives must be offered to encourage students to pursue careers in agriculture. Students must be re-educated to recognize that vibrant businesses can be developed by utilizing the products from the raw materials of agriculture.
9. Tertiary level education (TLI) providers need to plan in collaboration with the other stakeholder (employers and students) to ensure that they are really addressing education and training needs of the consumers.
10. There should be a special unit established at the region's university. The specific task of which should be to source and secure financial assistance for the region's developmental programmes.