



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
ST. AUGUSTINE CAMPUS, TRINIDAD & TOBAGO, WEST INDIES

OFFICE OF THE CAMPUS PRINCIPAL

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Remarks by the Campus Principal

The Inclusive Education Conference Opening

February 15, 2017

Good morning.

It is with a sense of great satisfaction that I welcome you all to Trinidad and Tobago and to the first international Inclusive Education Conference to be held in the Caribbean.

If you are a visitor to Trinidad and Tobago, know that you've come at a time when the entire nation is in a frenzy eagerly counting down to February 27th and 28th, the day of the 'greatest show on earth – our national festival that is Carnival. There is an explosion of cultural activities happening just outside the borders of this Campus as day becomes night and night, day. While here there is relative peace and serenity, I trust you will have opportunities to enjoy Trinidad and Tobago in other ways. In particular, you must hear our Steelpan, Trinidad and Tobago's national instrument and our gift to the world.

This collaborative effort of the three Schools of Education of the University of the West Indies and the State University of New York at Potsdam has an ambitious agenda. You, the participants and contributors, are being asked to focus on the theme "Achieving Education for All: Resolving

Challenges of learning difference, learner diversity, and ‘at risk children and youth’ and to cover 14 sub-themes in four days. I have every confidence that you will be successful.

The United Nations has been championing the implementation of socially - just practices in education since the 1970s. As you are aware, while Education for All is philosophically sound, translating it into practice in countries that are economically, racially, culturally and geo-politically diverse is still a challenge.

The Education For All goals contribute to the UN’s global pursuit of the eight Millennium Development Goals, especially the goals relating to universal primary education and gender equality in education.

One of The UWI’s leadership mandates, is that we set an example to the wider society in the conduct of its affairs. For this reason, it is fitting that The University of the West Indies – a prime repository of pre and post-colonial Caribbean history, its challenges and achievements – be the host of an international conference of such critical importance to our development.

The St. Augustine Campus is proud to serve as the venue for your deliberations. I have no doubt your recommendations will redound to the benefit of this region.

I know I am speaking to the converted here, but it bears repeating. Our multicultural developing countries are constantly struggling to juggle competing economic needs so as to deliver engaging and relevant learning experiences for all learners. The scope of the challenge is daunting – the need for a responsive curriculum and a working partnership among administrators, teachers, parents, learners and other stakeholders. Yet, if we don’t overcome this challenge, our nations will never reach developed status and will remain mired in a cycle of ‘developing’ or ‘emerging’ nations, with our best minds seeking fortunes abroad.

Indeed, technology is a key facilitator in achieving Education for All. The University of the West Indies was cognisant of that fact and in 2008 established its fourth Campus, the Open Campus, which offers a multi-mode teaching approach and allows us to serve the under-served territories of the Caribbean. So too, is our expansion into the southland with the development of our satellite campus in Penal-Debe. This is very much in line with The UWI’s imperative to widen access, one of the goal drivers of our strategic plan. However, unless all the countries have the infrastructure and the means to deliver and receive these online and distance-learning programmes, we are not achieving full potential. In Trini parlance we say, we’re ‘spinning top in mud’ – in other words, we can be doing a lot of things to achieve an end but still getting nowhere.

On the eve of Independence, August 30, 1962, Trinidad and Tobago's first Prime Minister the Honourable Dr Eric Williams exhorted school children as follows:

“On your scholastic development, the salvation of the Nation is dependent...you carry the future of Trinidad and Tobago in your school bags.”

His words apply to all of the Caribbean and are as meaningful 55 years later as they were at that historic time.

Inclusive education is critical for us, to ensure our region's collective survival and growth. Our mandate must be to provide the educational means for every citizen to achieve a decent standard of living through adequate preparation in the knowledge and skills needed for the local, regional and global workplace. We must be able to deliver an education system that allows everyone to find an equal opportunity to benefit from education and, in so doing, help build stronger nation states.

Yet many learners still find themselves academically and socially at risk due to diverse factors such as, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, age, urban/rural location, religion, and school climate as well as their own learning differences - from giftedness to learning difficulties. This conference is an opportunity to share experiences and to learn from others on how we can do things better.

The expertise, the knowledge, and the will are gathered in this room and in this conference. Together, we can cause a change in the way we operate and help advance the desire for worldwide inclusive education.

I wish you every success in your workshops and deliberations and I look forward very much to hearing your recommendations.

Thank you.