



# UWI TODAY

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES • ST AUGUSTINE CAMPUS

SUNDAY 29 MARCH 2026



## Sight for Sore Eyes

**“Orange is my favourite colour,” says Ms Merita Hector, Secretary (Student Affairs) at The UWI School of Nursing. Ms Hector was modelling a pair of glasses at the official launch of The UWI Optical Store on February 27.**

Based in Preysal, Couva, the store is an initiative of the Optometry Unit within the Department of Clinical Surgical Sciences, Faculty of Medical Sciences. It offers a full range of eye-health services and products using the latest technologies at community-friendly prices. The store also serves as a centre for training and practical experience for students of The UWI’s Optometry programme—all that, plus an abundance of stylish frames.

“I really like these glasses frames because of the vibrant shade of orange and the unique style that complements my face and my energy,” says Ms Hector. “I was extremely excited when they were shown to me. The mix of colours gives it a fun, standout look, and the frame shape is modern and bold.”

PHOTO: ANEEL KARIM





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## FROM THE PRINCIPAL

# Confronting the Unfinished Work of Gender Equality



**EDITOR'S NOTE:** On Sunday, March 8, 2026, UWI St Augustine Campus Principal Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine gave the feature address at the InterClub of Trinidad and Tobago's 24th annual event to commemorate International Women's Day. UWI TODAY is pleased to share an abbreviated version of her address.

## The theme for this year's International Women's

**Day—Rights. Justice. Action.** For all Women and Girls—is pertinent, given a startling assertion by UN Women: Women and girls have never been closer to equality, and never closer to losing it. When we look around at the progress made over the years, one would think we would have achieved gender equality by now. Yet, that is not the case.

As a longtime advocate and champion of equity and social justice, my work has often led me to issues of women's rights and gender. I have often said that we cannot 'cherry-pick' human rights. Rights are intersectional. Labour concerns must address equal remuneration; discussions on gender-based violence, power relations, HIV, or migrant justice must address poverty, structural inequalities, and often race.

## Rights and the Law

When people consider rights, they often think of the law and the notion that the law treats everyone the same. Yet formal equality is often insufficient when structural and systemic inequalities persist. We must address underlying social and economic hierarchies that disadvantage particular groups to achieve substantive equality. This is especially true for women and girls who may also be members of minority groups such as the disabled, poor, migrant class, or LGBTQI+ community. Rights include protection for the underpaid domestic worker who is often a woman of colour, or the migrant woman afraid to seek help because of her status. Equality requires that we do more than simply declare rights: we must ensure the conditions to exercise these rights are present.

## Rights and Enforcement

Trinidad and Tobago has committed to several international human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. While these commitments affirm rights, rights written into law are only the beginning. There are countless structural, economic, and social barriers—ranging from lacking financial resources to fear of retaliation and institutional bias. We see this in the pervasive challenge of Gender-Based Violence. If a woman's report is dismissed or a protection order is not enforced, we know the tragic results. Our region has among the highest rates of Domestic Violence in the world. Any right that cannot be accessed or enforced is a right denied.

## Rights and Technology

Our laws have yet to keep pace with the rapid advancement of technology. The evolution of AI capabilities—seen in deepfake pornography—has accelerated digital violence from stalking to revenge porn. Startling figures suggest roughly 1.8 billion women and girls have no legal protection from digital violence.

However, AI also brings opportunities. Digital inclusion and gender equality have been reframed as human rights issues. Women and girls without consistent digital access will be disproportionately excluded from benefits, reinforcing existing inequalities. Our Campus launched the Artificial Intelligence Innovation Centre to advance AI research and policy. We need frameworks to be fully operationalised—especially with gender-responsive provisions—for AI to truly benefit women and girls.

## Economic and Climate Justice

Access to justice is a foundational requirement, and a significant barrier women face is economic justice. Women comprise the majority of unpaid care workers and are often overrepresented in the lowest-paid sectors. Economic justice is not a luxury; when women's labour is undervalued, society as a whole suffers.

In the Caribbean, our women and girls also face issues of climate justice. Climate disasters exacerbate existing inequalities. Those living in poverty are disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters, facing greater economic insecurity and challenges accessing assistance. Women emit the least greenhouse

gases yet disproportionately experience the severe impacts of climate disruption. What is required is adaptation financing and disaster frameworks that reflect the realities of the most vulnerable.

## Family Planning Association of T&T

In every crisis, we see the regression of decades of progress. As President of the Family Planning Association (FPATT), I have seen colleagues in war-torn countries like Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan attacked, their clinics bombed, and women killed.

FPATT also directly confronts tangible problems faced by our women and girls. We continue to serve under-represented communities, directly addressing ongoing problems such as teenage pregnancy, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health rights, need for gynecological screening, HIV treatment, pre-menopausal care, etc.

I pause to reiterate the need for comprehensive sex education for our young people. It is not promiscuity – it is aimed at Prevention and Improved Health Outcomes. We have also increased access to rural areas with our Mobile Clinics.

May I give a plug to you to help sustain our FPATT. We are the oldest NGO in the country, proudly serving this country for over 69 years – remarkable. Now our very existence is threatened because of geopolitical issues – drying up our funding.

We need more volunteers and more funding. I hope you will help.

## Action - What do we do now?

It is not enough to recognise these issues; we must ensure rights are made real through deliberate action. We must embrace gender-responsive budgeting. Advancing women's rights should not be seen as a zero-sum struggle; by securing the rights of women, we strengthen families and communities.

We must enforce laws that protect women from violence, ensuring safety and dignity are fundamental rights. This requires consistent efforts to change mindsets and justice reform. For those of us in this room, our role is clear. We need influence, investment, and workplace equity. Our fight for rights, justice, and action is far from over. I urge everyone to unite to dismantle the barriers that hinder equality.



FROM LEFT: Ms Amanda Jardine, Vice-President of the Inter-Club of Trinidad and Tobago (ICTT); Ms Donna Ali, winner of the ICTT 2026 Woman of the Year award; Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine, UWI St Augustine Campus Principal; and Ms Justine Aboud-Chamely, ICTT President, at the Hyatt Regency Trinidad, Port of Spain, on Sunday, 8 March, for the ICTT's 24th Afternoon Tea in celebration of International Women's Day.

PHOTO: COURTESY INTER-CLUB OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO.

*Rose-Marie Belle Antoine*

**Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine**  
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## ■ CAMPUS NEWS



# Caring for Eyes

UWI enters the Optometry business, underserved communities profit

BY JOANNE BRIGGS

**“We are here to expand our excellence and our service to rural communities and underserved communities.”**

These were the words of UWI St Augustine Campus Principal Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine at the official launch of the UWI Optical Store on February 27, 2026.

The store, which will provide affordable eyewear and state-of-the-art optometric care to communities, students and staff, is located at the Couva Hospital and Multi-Training Facility in Preysal.

In her address, Professor Antoine said that the campus's commitment to South Trinidad was key, adding that the campus “remained committed to the health and well-being of the country”.

UWI Optical is an extension of UWI St Augustine's eye health services under the Optometry Unit of the Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS). The store will also be a centre for student training, integrating academic and practical environments.

#### A UWI MADE initiative

UWI Optical is part of the UWI Made Initiative, a drive to fortify the campus's self-sustainability through innovative, revenue-generating products and services. The UWI campuses are all governed by its Triple A Strategy, “Revenue Revolution”, which serves to raise funds through these and other profit-making efforts.

The strategy uses the institution's potential, knowledge, research, and resources to fulfil their funding target and ensure sustained, long-term growth.

Principal Antoine said the addition of UWI Optical to UWI Made enhances the university's entrepreneurial footprint while ensuring quality standards.

“We know that we are not just here to compete. There are lots of other clinics. We are also here to maintain a high standard of optical care in the country and to enhance it as far as we can,” she said.

Head of the Optometry Unit, Dr Kingsley Ekemiri noted this addition to optometry services represented a milestone for his unit and FMS.

“[UWI Optical] reflects a continued advancement of our academic, clinical, and service commitments, and most importantly, it chronicles our institutional dedication to excellence in medical education and service delivery,” Dr Ekemiri said.

He also pointed out that the integration of academic learning with direct clinical service such as the UWI Optical, is essential in health profession education.

#### ‘The ability to see should not be a luxury’

In delivering the feature address, the Dean of FMS, Professor Hariharan Seetharaman, said there must be a balance between revenue generation for profit and social outlook.

“We teach our students not to practice medicine with profit motives, however the reality is many branches in healthcare come under the so-called ‘industry,’” he said.

Prof Seetharaman suggested greater priority be placed on the social benefits of healthcare.

“In [UWI Optical's] case, the profits are channelled back into bringing about positive change and assessing activities to the benefit of the society. Then, the entrepreneurship evolves from a business venture into what we call social entrepreneurship—which blends financial goals with a desire to create positive social outlooks.”

Dr Ravi Maharaj, Department Head of Clinical Surgical Sciences echoed these sentiments. UWI Optical, he said, should be viewed as a service to the community and the public.

“Having the ability to see should not be a luxury to any citizen in this country, and we need to offer accessible, high quality health care,” he said.



FROM LEFT: Professor Hariharan Seetharaman, Dean of UWI St Augustine's Faculty of Medical Sciences; Campus Principal Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine; Dr Ravi Maharaj, Head of the Department of Clinical Surgical Sciences; and Dr Kingsley Ekemiri, Head of the Optometry Programme, cut the ribbon to officially launch The UWI Optical Store. PHOTO: ANEEL KARIM

**UWI Optical is an extension of UWI St Augustine's eye health services under the Optometry Unit of the Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS). The store will also be a centre for student training, integrating academic and practical environments.**



Before its official launch, UWI Optical initiated a pilot project in July 2025, with the dispensing of more than 100 spectacles to staff, students, and the public. One example was an 11-year-old student from Moruga who received his first pair of glasses during that period. UWI Optical gave his parents the opportunity to afford a pair of glasses to help improve his very severe eyesight problem, greatly improving his primary school experience.

During the pilot period, UWI Optical also hosted a progressive lens-measuring workshop to Year Four students and clinical demonstrators.

#### From supplying eyewear to producing and managing key aspects of process

Koscina Sookram-Quintal, manager of The UWI Optical Store, shared some of the plans for the store, including the completion of an in-house dispensing lab.

“This,” she said, “would allow us to move from simply supplying eyewear to producing and managing key aspects of the finishing process right here in Couva.”

She added, “It would provide valuable, hands-on training skill opportunities for our students in cutting and fitting spectacle prescriptions.”

There are plans to introduce a course for dispensing opticians, creating a pipeline of trained professionals who can serve the region while raising standards in vision care. A structured contact lens programme is also included in UWI Optical's expansion.

Through partnerships with healthcare firm ARG, Eye See You, and Lens Tech Labs, the store carries fashionable high-quality frames and lenses. In addition, the retail space uses optical software for point-of-sale, inventory management, financial reporting, and customer relationship management.

# Charting a responsible course for AI in Trinidad and Tobago

*UWI Hosts UNESCO's AI Readiness Assessment Methodology Validation Workshop*



Stakeholders and committee members gather for a group photo at the UNESCO RAM Validation Workshop 2026 with Dr Letetia Addison, Lead Expert (centre), held at the Office of the Campus Principal on Friday, February 27, 2026.

**A national roadmap for responsible artificial intelligence (AI) in Trinidad and Tobago is taking shape.** The roadmap is aimed at using AI to accelerate development while reducing risk, with one shared direction for government, academia, industry and society.

This was the basis of a National Validation Workshop hosted by UWI St Augustine at the Campus Principal's Salon. The workshop, held on February 27, 2026, was a collaborative event with the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Caribbean.

The workshop was facilitated by Dr Letetia Addison, UNESCO Readiness Assessment Methodology (RAM) Lead Expert for Trinidad and Tobago, who has been leading the national AI readiness assessment process and coordinating the multi-stakeholder consultations that informed the validation exercise.

Speaking at the workshop, UWI St Augustine Campus Principal said, "This collaboration not only strengthens national readiness but also positions Trinidad and Tobago as an early adopter and potential regional leader. As we engage in this process, we reaffirm our commitment to ethical and transparent AI strategies that will not only foster innovation but also ensure that our societal values are upheld."

The workshop brought together over 50 stakeholders from across government, higher education, private sector, civil society, and international development agencies, marking an important transition from national consultation to structured alignment. The UNESCO RAM forms part of a broader national AI assessment initiative supported by UNESCO and The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), aimed at generating evidence-based insights to strengthen Trinidad and Tobago's AI policy and governance framework. Throughout the day, stakeholders discussed five dimensions of AI readiness: Legal and Regulatory, Technological and Infrastructural, Scientific and Educational, Societal and Cultural, and Economic.

This process was the final review to verify and refine findings emerging from a series of consultations convened in January 2026 under UNESCO RAM. The validation



Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, Senator Dominic Smith, addresses attendees.



'This workshop is a very important step in our development, embrace, and creative utilisation of AI, and I can think of no better place to hold it than the St Augustine campus.' Campus Principal, Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine

exercise ensures that the national AI roadmap accurately reflects the unique priorities, institutional landscape and developmental aspirations of Trinidad and Tobago.

"We seek a future in which technology serves people, not the other way around," said Senator Dominic Smith, Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, in his address to attendees.

"A future in which innovation flourishes without compromising rights, equity, or public trust. A future in which small states like ours are active architects of technological progress."

In his address, Minister Smith affirmed the government's commitment to building a responsible, inclusive and forward-looking digital society.

Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine, UWI St Augustine Campus Principal, told those in attendance that the workshop "is a very important step in our development, embrace, and creative utilisation of AI, and I can think of no better place to hold it than the St Augustine campus."

Professor Antoine said the campus has a long history of AI leadership and development through the AI unit in the Faculty of Engineering.

"We have been, and continue to be, pioneers in this discipline." Professor Antoine stated that the launch of the AI Innovation Centre (AIIC) in 2025, further institutionalised The UWI's commitment to support policy, dialogue, innovation and capacity building in AI. The AIIC is the Caribbean's largest AI centre dedicated to advancing AI research, capacity-building, commercialisation, policy and governance.

Other speakers included Mr Eric Falt, Regional Director and Representative, UNESCO Regional Office for the Caribbean and Dr Addison, who noted that "AI readiness is a governance question, one that requires intentional coordination, inclusive dialogue, and institutional clarity."

Several UWI academics also presented related research during a spotlight session and engaged with stakeholders in roundtable discussions and plenary exchanges aimed at strengthening national AI readiness.

The National AI Readiness Report is tentatively scheduled for official public launch in May 2026.

## OUR CAMPUS



# UWI GAMES RETURN TO ST AUGUSTINE



**“Region reunited, flames ignited”**, that is how The University of the West Indies is describing the return of UWI Games. After more than a decade, this sporting event that brings student-athletes from UWI campuses throughout the region, returns to St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

The games will be held at UWI St Augustine and other local venues from 21 to 26 May 2026. An estimated 600 student-athletes will represent their campuses in basketball, cricket, football, hockey, lawn tennis, netball, swimming, table tennis, volleyball, and track and field. All five UWI campuses—Cave Hill, Five Islands, Global Campus, Mona, and St Augustine—will compete.

The last time the games were held in Trinidad and Tobago was 2015.

“Rooted in a rich tradition that dates back to the 1960s, the Games have been revived with fresh energy and renewed ambition,” a statement from The UWI read.

“The UWI Games create meaningful opportunities for student-athletes to interact and connect across campuses, fostering healthy rivalry, regional-level integration, and lasting bonds amongst our Caribbean neighbours.”

It also creates opportunities for UWI St Augustine to overcome the reigning champs, UWI Mona.

The games will be held at The UWI Sport and Physical Education Centre (SPEC), Hasely Crawford Stadium, the National Aquatic Centre, and the National Racquet Sport Centre.

■ **For more information and the UWI Games schedule,** visit their website: <https://sta.uwi.edu/uwigames/>



FROM THE ARCHIVES: Images from the last UWI Games hosted at the St Augustine campus in 2015.

## Maikea Bramble CAPTAIN ON THE NETBALL COURT

BY DARIUS PHILLIP

**EDITORS NOTE:** *UWI Games are coming!* Over the next few months, **UWI TODAY** will profile some of the campus's student-athletes as they prepare to compete with teams from the other UWI campuses.



**Maikea Bramble, age 21, wants to be an inspiration for young netballers.**

“I think the younger athletes coming up into the sport are my outlook and my motivation,” says the captain and goal-shooter for both Trinidad and Tobago’s national under-21 and UWI St Augustine’s netball teams.

“I just want to be someone who can inspire them. I want to be an example for them.”

For followers of the game in T&T, Maikea’s name, and skill on the netball court, are well-known. She represented The UWI in the Courts All Sectors Netball League’s Championship Division this past February, scoring 69 of 71 goals for her team and leading the bracket. She was a member of the Trinidad and Tobago National Team on the international stage that qualified in Guadeloupe for the Netball World Youth Cup in Gibraltar in 2025.

That same year, she set her own personal record of the most goals that she scored so far in her career during the Lystra Lewis Port of Spain Netball League of June 2025. Maikea racked up 80 goals over the opposing Police Netball section. Even she was surprised by her performance.

“I could never imagine that I scored so many. When I got the results, I was really shocked and I excited too.”

Now, Maikea is using her skill and experience to lead St Augustine’s team at the UWI Games. She believes that these attributes are having a positive effect on her younger teammates.

“I think they are amazed sometimes when they see me perform on the court,” she says.

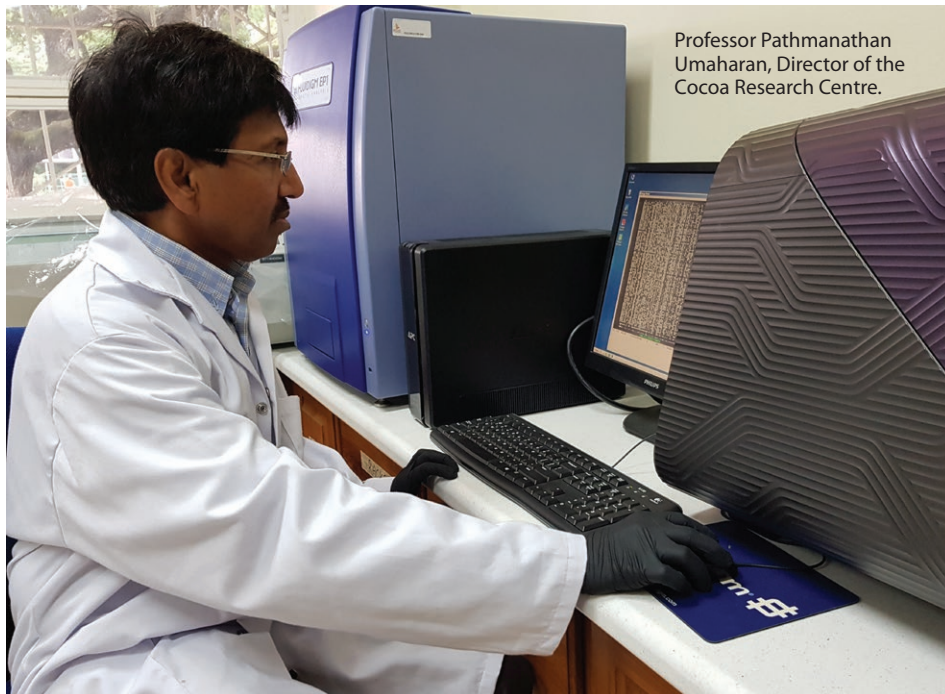
For her, being a team captain is one of the greatest gifts she has ever experienced, both for the on-court duties and off-court team support.

Currently pursuing a Bachelor’s in Sports Kinetics at The UWI’s St Augustine Academy of Sport in the Faculty of Sport, Maikea says that her future goals in netball are to secure a spot on the senior national team and earn a scholarship to play internationally. She also wants to give back to the netball organisations through teaching.

“If you can believe it, you can achieve it,” she says. “Just do your best. Your best is enough.”

Maikea and her teammates have that winning ethos focused on glory for UWI St Augustine at UWI Games 2026.

## UWI IN SOCIETY



Professor Pathmanathan Umaharan, Director of the Cocoa Research Centre.



# CERTIFIED TRINITARIO

*UWI's Cocoa Research Centre uses DNA fingerprinting, QR codes, and more to build the back-end infrastructure to promote and protect T&T's cocoa internationally*

**Trinidad and Tobago's cocoa is world renowned.** Trinitario cocoa is known for its robust cocoa flavour associated with ancillary fruity, floral and spicy flavour notes. How do we protect its reputation and guarantee that its quality continues to be recognised internationally? The Government of Trinidad and Tobago, working with the Cocoa Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago and UWI's Cocoa Research Centre, have a solution: a certification mark for "Trinidad and Tobago Trinitario Fine Flavour Cocoa".

The mark, recently unveiled by the government and managed by the Cocoa Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago, is a formal, internationally recognised trademark designed to celebrate products derived from T&T's Trinitario cocoa variety. It can potentially unlock premium prices for local cocoa farmers.

"Trinidad and Tobago, as the country of origin of the Trinitario cacao, has always held a special place globally," says Professor Pathmanathan Umaharan, Director of the CRC, "and The Trinidad and Tobago Trinitario Fine Flavour Cocoa mark brings that recognition to the products that carry the mark."

### Protecting the Chocolate Soils

Prof Umaharan explained that some years ago, the cocoa farmers from Gran Couva registered a geographical indication entitled "Montserrat Hills Cocoa", an intellectual property mark tied to cocoa and cocoa products produced from a specific area of historical repute. The mark differentiates superior quality cocoa borne from the fabled "chocolate soils" of the Montserrat Hills. Geographical indications, unlike certification marks, are owned by the community from which they come.

However, there's more to creating a certification mark than stamping a product. It involves enormous back-end work.

"The back-end of a certification mark refers to the behind-the-scenes processes, legal requirements, standards, and technical operations that authorise, monitor, and enforce the use of a symbol," explains Prof Umaharan. "A certification mark on a product indicates that a third party has verified that goods meet specific, pre-defined standards."

This is important to protect the brand—and consumers—from green-washing, the deceptive marketing tactic of presenting a company's products, as environmentally friendly when they are not, often to boost their reputation. It involves using certification marks with vague or misleading claims to create a false impression of sustainability.

### A Research and Technology Shield Against Forgery

"Building the back-end infrastructure for certification marks is critically important to provide validity and trust to the marks," says Prof Umaharan. "Providing the certification marks a legal basis. Clearly outlining the claims of the mark, as well as developing standards, building technically sound evidence-based indicators, and an independent third-party certification are all necessary to build trust in the mark."



**"Trinidad and Tobago, as the country of origin of the Trinitario cacao, has always held a special place globally, and The Trinidad and Tobago Trinitario Fine Flavour Cocoa mark brings that recognition to the products that carry the mark."**



He adds, "Ideally, the mark should also be supported by a traceability system that can provide visibility of the certifications to the consumer. Building the back-end support system therefore requires a close collaboration between government (Legal Affairs, standard setting body), technical organisations that provide third-party evidence-based certification and traceability services, as well as agencies that manage the certification mark."

The CRC has done a massive amount of work in this area. This includes:

- DNA fingerprinting: CRC offers a global service to support varietal certification, that allows a certification mark to make claims of the varietal origin of cocoa bean lots e.g. Trinitario;
- Chemical fingerprinting: CRC is building a near infrared spectroscopy-based chemical fingerprint database that allows certification marks to make claims of the specific geographical origin of the cocoa bean lot;
- Sustainability scoring: Through various projects, CRC has developed evidence-based indicators and scoring systems for economic, environmental, and social sustainability that allows certification marks to make claims of sustainability;
- Digital traceability: CRC's dedicated traceability app, along with a KPI platform that provides a unique QR code for products, provides visibility of the certifications to the consumer, allowing consumer choice.

"Together these allow for tree-to-bar certification of products, an innovation that can set products from Trinidad and Tobago apart in the marketplace, thus giving them an even stronger comparative advantage," says Prof Umaharan.

### Multi-Agency Effort

Building this infrastructure is not a solo mission. Prof Umaharan emphasises that "close institutional collaboration" is essential. This includes the Intellectual Property Office providing the legal basis, the Bureau of Standards facilitating trade through national standards, CRC providing varietal, origin and sustainability certification, and the Ministry of Agriculture and the Cocoa Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago managing farm-level certifications.

To ensure these systems remain beyond reproach, the CRC is currently having its laboratories accredited to provide the most robust technical support possible.

By combining historical repute with modern digital validation, Trinidad and Tobago is working to ensure that its "fine flavour" reputation remains as authentic as the soil it grows in.

## ■ NATURE

**Open a cabinet inside the National Herbarium** at The UWI and you are greeted not by a burst of colour, but by quiet order. Carefully mounted leaves, flowers and stems rest on archival sheets, each labelled with a name, a place and a moment in time. Some of these specimens were collected nearly 200 years ago. Together, they form a remarkable archive of Trinidad and Tobago's flora and a window into the ecological past of the Caribbean.

The National Herbarium is one of the oldest botanical collections in the Americas. For generations it has served as a centre for plant research, conservation and education. Scientists, students and environmental researchers visit its shelves to study plant diversity, trace environmental changes, and better understand the natural heritage of the islands.

The atmosphere inside the herbarium is unhurried and focused. Cabinets line the walls while worktables hold stacks of specimens awaiting cataloguing or research. The scent of dried plant material lingers in the air. It is a space built for patience and observation where even the smallest leaf or seed can reveal something new.

### **'If we are not passionate and consistent, why do it at all?'**

Since 2021, the herbarium has been under the stewardship of curator Dr J Francisco Morales, a botanist with 36 years of experience whose work has focused on strengthening and modernising the collection. Though he was expected to begin the role in 2020, the pandemic delayed his arrival at The UWI. When he eventually stepped into the position, he brought with him a deep appreciation for the discipline of plant taxonomy.

"Botany and taxonomy require a lot of passion and more importantly consistency," he said. "If we are not passionate or consistent, why do it at all?"

The herbarium houses thousands of preserved plant specimens from Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean. Each sheet represents a plant collected in the field, carefully pressed, dried and preserved so its characteristics can be studied long after the living plant has disappeared.

Many of the oldest samples date back to the early nineteenth century. According to Dr Morales, the origins of collections like this are closely tied to exploration and colonial expansion when plants were seen as valuable commodities.

"In the early days, colonial conquest began with a search for exotic plants, flora and fauna," he explained. "A pineapple which originates in Central America was not the fruit we see it as today. It was reserved for kings and aristocrats and used as a display of wealth rather than nourishment. Plants became a way to assert your status. Back then, a pineapple would have cost the equivalent of about 5,000 US dollars in today's world."

These early expeditions led to the documentation and preservation of countless plant species. Today, those specimens provide an invaluable record of what the region's vegetation looked like centuries ago.

### **From lowland forests, to mountain ranges, to coastal ecosystems**

The collection includes plants that are familiar to many people in Trinidad and Tobago. Local trees and flowering plants appear frequently among the sheets, from species found in lowland forests to those native to mountain ranges and coastal ecosystems. For researchers, these preserved plants provide clues about how species vary across environments and how ecosystems change over time.

Dr Morales often explains the importance of collecting multiple specimens of the same plant species. While it may seem repetitive, the practice is essential to understanding biodiversity.

"If we were to take one sample from a human in today's world as a representation of that entire population, the science would be flawed," he said. "Plants, like people, have different origins and thrive differently depending on the conditions around them. We need variety in our sample size."

Collecting and preparing specimens is a meticulous process. Botanists travel into forests, wetlands and savannahs to gather plants. Once

Dr J Francisco Morales, curator of the National Herbarium, shares some plant lore.  
PHOTO: CHERISSE BERKELEY



PHOTO: ANEEL KARIM



# *A Living* Inside NATIONAL HERBARIUM

BY CHERISSE LA...



collected, the samples are pressed, dried and mounted so their structures remain visible for study. Labels include details about where the plant was found, when it was collected and who documented it.

### Even the smallest error can compromise a specimen's usefulness.

"We have to be very careful with everything we do when drying our samples and preparing them for testing," Dr Morales said. "It is easy for contamination to happen and sometimes we only know a sample is unusable after the time and money have already been spent and the results come back."

To protect the collection from insects and parasites, the herbarium is fumigated annually during periods when the campus is closed.

Beyond preservation, the herbarium continues to evolve as a research facility. Since taking on the role of curator, Dr Morales has undertaken a major reorganisation of the specimen library. Traditional tracking numbers have been replaced with barcodes, and cabinets are now arranged alphabetically.

Colour-coded labels indicate where specimens were collected, while storage conditions are carefully monitored to protect the delicate samples.

These changes are part of a broader effort to make the collection more accessible. Dr Morales is also developing an online database that will allow users to search the herbarium's holdings digitally. The goal is to have the system updated with current specimens within the next two years.

"The library is now organised in such a way that the average person can come and find what they are looking for without needing to know scientific names or genotypes," he said. "The incorporation of a map is also a great addition because people can now see exactly where the specimen came from."

### Exposing more people to the wonder of plant science

Despite the herbarium's importance, the field of botany faces a growing challenge. There are fewer trained botanists today than in previous generations.

"There are not many botanists," Dr Morales said. "Many of us have died and so there have been several gaps when one leaves or passes. Being consistent is important."

Part of his work involves encouraging interest in plant science and exposing more people to the work taking place inside the herbarium. He balances research, writing scientific papers and outreach that introduces students and the public to the world of botany.

One project he considers particularly meaningful is a publication documenting local medicinal plants.

"Often people know what something is good for, but they never know what the actual plant looks like," he said.

For Dr Morales, the project reflects a personal philosophy that has guided his career from dentistry to botany.

"I became a dentist because I wanted to help people," he said. "Through botany, I am also helping people."

Inside the quiet rooms of the National Herbarium, that sense of purpose is tangible. Each cabinet contains fragments of forests, savannahs and mountain slopes preserved on paper.

Together, they form a living archive of Trinidad and Tobago's plant life.

As climate change, development and habitat loss reshape landscapes across the Caribbean, collections like the one housed at The UWI are becoming even more important. They preserve knowledge of the plants that have existed here, and provide the scientific foundation needed to protect them in the future.

Within the orderly drawers of the herbarium, history and science meet. What may appear to be a collection of dried plants is in fact something far richer: a record of biodiversity, a tool for research, and a reminder of how deeply the natural world shapes our lives.

*Cherisse Lauren Berkeley is a journalist, activist, mas-maker, and multidisciplinary artist.*

# Archive: The NATIONAL HERBARIUM

CHERRISSE LAUREN BERKELEY



PHOTO: AMANDA LEE

## RESEARCH

Since 2024, The UWI and the Clara Lionel Foundation (CLF) have been collaborating on a two-year project focusing on early-warning systems for disaster-prone communities. In a three-part series, the three project components will be explored. Part two looks at the comprehensive research which was undertaken to determine how methods to monitor the movement of sargassum can be improved and how sargassum can be used to create value-added products.

CLARA  
LIONEL  
FOUNDATION

**For more than a decade, coastal communities across the Caribbean have been inundated with sargassum.**

Since large-scale blooms began affecting the region in 2011, Caribbean islands have struggled to manage the environmental, economic and social impacts of these recurring landings, with many communities lacking the monitoring tools needed to anticipate major influxes.

Across the region, it's now a common sight to see the brown-coloured seaweed washing up on coastlines in droves and changing their aesthetics.

But beyond sargassum's visually unappealing nature and its pungent smell, often likened to that of a rotting egg, sargassum is also consequential for livelihoods.

Sargassum affects the health and well-being of marine ecosystems and species like seagrasses, coral reefs and fisheries, which in turn affect critical industries like tourism and fishing.

It can also pose a threat to human health as a skin irritant and the catalyst for respiratory ailments.

#### Significant influxes of sargassum since 2011

Recognising that sargassum influxes are a persistent regional threat driven by climate change and rising nutrient pollution, the UWI St Augustine Department of Geography is conducting research in Trinidad and Tobago to develop tools that predict the seaweed's movement and explore ways to turn it into valuable resources.

The initiative reflects UWI's growing role in advancing applied climate research to support practical decision-making for Caribbean governments, coastal managers, and vulnerable communities.

Since 2024, Tristen Augustine, the project's research assistant, has played a key role, and recently spoke to UWI TODAY about his experiences and expectations.

"Like the rest of the Caribbean," he shared, "Trinidad and Tobago has been experiencing significant influxes of sargassum since 2011.

"In Trinidad, we mostly see it on the eastern coast. But in Tobago, the entire island is affected because of its size and location in the Atlantic.

"Within the last two years, we've observed areas like Store Bay, which wasn't previously as affected, become inundated."

With the unique environmental and geographical vulnerabilities of Tobago to the seaweed, Augustine said it was one of the reasons why Geography Department lecturer Dr Gabrielle Thongs saw the importance of including sargassum-focused research as part of a larger pilot project in Trinidad and Tobago that is aimed at improving disaster resilience and early-warning systems.

Dating back to 2024, the project is a collaboration between The UWI and the Clara Lionel Foundation.

Founded by Barbadian global superstar Rihanna, the Clara Lionel Foundation is a nonprofit organisation that supports climate solutions, equitable health access, arts and culture, future generations, women's entrepreneurship, and emergency response.

#### Using drones as a research tool

Dr Thongs secured funding from the foundation in 2024 after working alongside the Office of Global Partnerships and Sustainable Futures team.

## The Road to Resilience (Part 2)

# Exploring new ways to monitor and use SARGASSUM

BY TYRELL GITTENS



Tristen Augustine, a researcher from UWI St Augustine's Department of Geography, pilots a drone during coastal monitoring at Manzanilla Beach. PHOTOS: COURTESY TRISTEN AUGUSTINE

**"We used drones to assess and analyse the accuracy of sargassum forecasting and monitoring systems, which are based on satellite imagery.**

For the sargassum research, Augustine said a lot of thought was placed into utilising the strengths of geography as an integrative discipline.

"We used drones to assess and analyse the accuracy of sargassum forecasting and monitoring systems, which are based on satellite imagery.

"We compared the observations captured by the drones with information derived from publicly available satellite-based monitoring platforms that track sargassum activity across the region. Through rigorous testing of several available systems, we identified satellite imagery products that can detect early offshore accumulations, providing a useful indicator of potential sargassum influxes before they reach the coastline," said Augustine.

By combining satellite observations with drone-based verification, the research demonstrated how multiple local geospatial technologies can be integrated to improve the reliability of early detection systems for coastal hazards such as sargassum landings.

"What we learnt from this research is that online satellite

tools have limitations, such as interference from sunlight or cloud cover, which can affect precision.

"Tests on beaches like Manzanilla confirmed that satellite imagery alone cannot pinpoint exact locations or quantities of sargassum. However, even with these limitations, the imagery provides a valuable overview of potential sargassum movements, helping local stakeholders make informed decisions.

#### Early-warning system for fisherfolk, municipal authorities, and coastal managers

Augustine added that weekly satellite imagery will be shared via the early-warning system (EWS) app to indicate anticipated high-influx periods, providing communities with accessible, evidence-based early warnings that support planning and response. This will provide all app users with accessible, evidence-based early awareness.

In practical terms, this information can assist fisherfolk, municipal authorities and coastal managers in preparing for anticipated landings, scheduling cleanup operations

## RESEARCH

A drone image used to detect sargassum accumulation along the shoreline.



and making operational decisions that reduce disruption to livelihoods and tourism activities.

While it's important to monitor sargassum and prepare for its arrival, Augustine said it's equally important to have a plan for the sargassum once it's onshore and to find ways to turn it from a "nuisance into something valuable".

For the second aspect of the research, it was important to incorporate human geography approaches, with the technological and physical geography approach, to assess the social and economic dimensions of the problem.

Surveys, interviews, and questionnaires were used to capture the lived experiences and socio-economic impacts of the sargassum.

He explained, "So, the term we use is the valorisation of sargassum."

Rather than viewing the seaweed solely as waste, the concept of valorisation explores ways in which sargassum can be transformed into useful products that support new economic activities while simultaneously addressing the environmental challenge of large-scale landings.

"We interviewed a variety of stakeholders, including entrepreneurs who currently utilise sargassum for various products.

"Sargassum can be used to create agricultural inputs like fertilisers and compost, and we even have a sargassum-based cosmetic and personal care product coming right out of Trinidad and Tobago."

### Sargassum's commercial potential

He noted that in some parts of the Caribbean, sargassum is already being used to make building blocks and biofuels.

These emerging innovations demonstrate that sargassum has the potential to support new circular-economy industries across the Caribbean. At the same time, entrepreneurs often face significant challenges, including access to financing, institutional support, and clear policies, which this pilot project has highlighted as areas for attention. The complexity of these challenges, spanning economic, social, and environmental dimensions, underscores why this is a geography problem that requires an integrated, multidisciplinary approach to develop practical, regionally relevant solutions.

Incorporating the different aspects of geography, Augustine said it reinforced that the findings of the research were grounded in systematic, multi-layered research rather than anecdotal interpretation.

For Augustine, the opportunity to work on this pilot project has been an edifying one, particularly as an emerging researcher.

"It was an honour for me to be part of the project and to add to that field of knowledge. I think this project is an impactful stepping stone in the direction where we expand multidisciplinary approaches to sargassum monitoring, its valorisation and so on."

While the pilot project is based in Trinidad and Tobago, he is hopeful that its replicability will enable its methodology to be used regionally.

"The method is something that could be transferred to students so that they can use it within their own means to support organisations in their communities and carry the science forward."

"To me, it's important that this project is ultimately solution-orientated. It moves beyond just analysis and more

into the realm of actionable outcomes," said Augustine.

The analytical tools and interdisciplinary methods developed through this research will be incorporated into the Department of Geography's curriculum.

### Hands-on experience for students

Through this process, students will gain hands-on experience in geospatial monitoring, drone-based environmental observation and applied social research, helping to build the next generation of Caribbean scientists equipped to address regional environmental challenges.

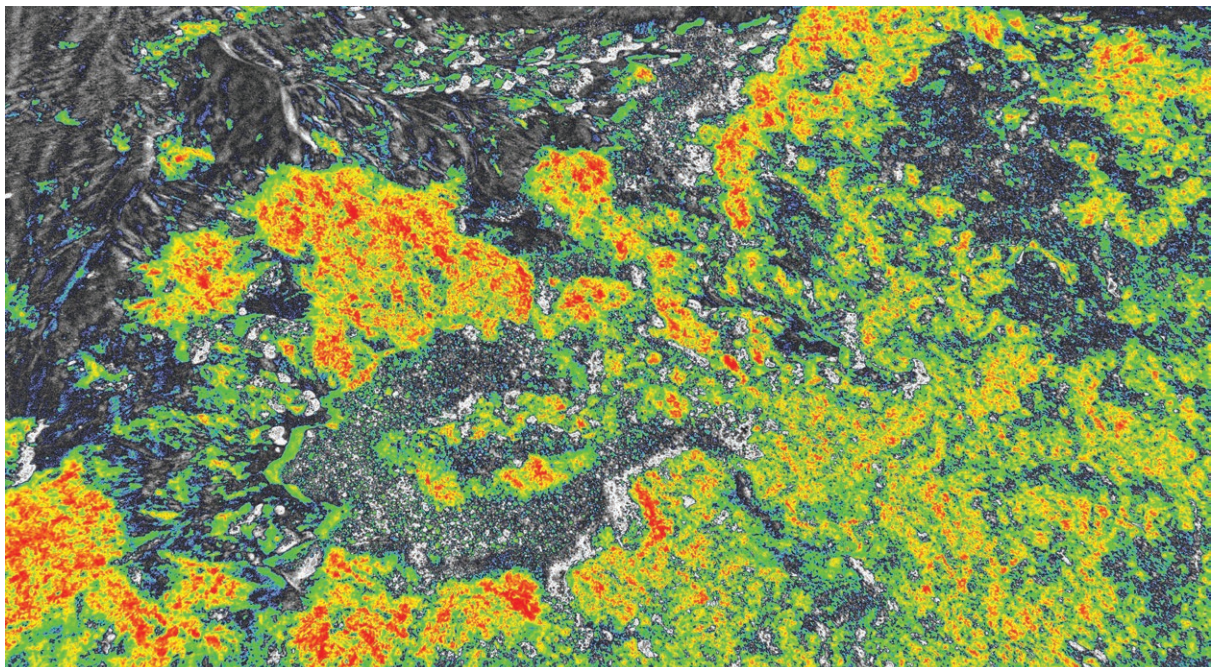
It is envisioned that students will be trained in both the technical and social research components, ensuring that they are equipped, as emerging geographers, with applied, real-world skills. The project simultaneously builds institutional capacity and produces research outputs.

While a key output of this initiative is the development of the EWS application, an equally important objective is to consolidate the data, methods, and lessons learned into a single, accessible knowledge base.

Dr Thongs shared, "In the Caribbean, many practical solutions already exist, yet they often go undocumented or unshared. By capturing and sharing this knowledge, the project ensures successful approaches can be adapted and scaled across communities facing similar risks.

"Equipping the next generation of Caribbean students and researchers with these tools and insights empowers them to take action, confront environmental challenges, and build a future filled with hope, opportunity, and resilience."

Tristen with a DJI Mavic 3M multispectral drone.



A multispectral drone image used to detect sargassum accumulation along the shoreline at Manzanilla Beach.

**OUR GRADUATES**

**UWI graduates are everywhere** – politics, business, the arts, and as public intellectuals. In the coming months, **UWI TODAY** will profile some of our high achieving alumni who have made or are making a positive impact on society.

# She Lives In You

UWI St Augustine graduate **Tramaine Lamy-Westcarr** continues legacy of Trinis in *The Lion King*

BY AMY LI BAKSH



Tramaine Lamy-Westcarr. PHOTO: MARK MCGEE

Tramaine (second from right, front row) shares the stage with beloved Disney characters. PHOTO: COURTESY DISNEY CRUISE LINE

**Tramaine Lamy-Westcarr was a singer from small.** From her secondary school days travelling to music festivals with her choir to singing in church, her voice was always a vital part of her life.

“The question my dad posed to me was ‘what are you going to do after?’”, says Lamy-Westcarr. She knew that the realm of soca and calypso just didn’t speak to her. But it was when she began her undergrad studies at the Department of Festival and Creative Arts that she was exposed to what would become her passion: musical theatre.

“I remember learning about how much Trinidad and Tobago and the region, by extension, had to offer in terms of the arts,” she says. Her timing was immaculate. She entered the university just as the UWI Arts Chorale was preparing to put on its first musical ‘Crazy for You.’ She fell in love with the artform. “That was what I was waiting on.”

## Finding her North Star

It was through her newfound interest that she was first exposed to Heather Headley. That became her north star. Headley, born and raised in Barataria, is now a Tony and Grammy award-winning actress and singer—and the *Lion King*’s first Nala on Broadway. “When I found that out, as a young Trinbagonian girl... it was sort of kismet to me.”

Her first audition for *The Lion King* was when she was 17, and she was shortlisted twice when they came to Trinidad. “I asked my grandfather to buy a ticket for me to go to New York to audition for musicals and get exposure out there”. But stepping into the international world of theatre opened her eyes. “I realised that I was really far behind in terms of formal training.” So that was where she put her attention. She worked on vocal training and continuing to audition, so that when the time came for her dream role, she would be ready.

In the meantime, she simultaneously uncovered a knack for teaching and mentoring, and began teaching theatre to secondary school students. Her love for teaching and her love for theatre would end up working in tandem when she finally got the role she had been preparing for.

During a three year stint with the Disney Cruise Line, she



Tramaine with Mr Louis McWilliams, the renowned Caribbean director and educator, after winning a Cacique Award for Best Female Performance in a Musical or Comedy. She calls McWilliams and musical director Mr Jessel Murray “cornerstones” of the DCFA.

got the call. She was given an offer to join the cast of *The Lion King* in Madrid. And then another call, for the cast in Brazil. But the timing was off. “I knew it was the show of my dreams. But talking it over with my mom and my family and they said ‘finish the contract you are in now, and then you can do whatever after.’” So she stayed on the cruise line.

## To London, and The Lion King

Once she had completed her contract, she moved to South Africa. By this time, she was 27—ten years in from her first audition for a part in her favourite musical. Finally, the timing was right. It was a contract for *The Lion King* in London.

“It was definitely a no-brainer,” says Lamy-Westcarr.

She made her way to the UK, and to the show she had been dreaming of since her time on the DCFA classrooms.

Today, it has been 14 years since Lamy-Westcarr joined the cast of London’s *Lion King*. She is the company’s longest standing female swing, meaning on any given night she might be playing Rafiki, Sarabi or Shenzi. Her teaching past has also come in handy, as she is also the Children’s Director, ensuring that the actors playing young Simba and young Nala are prepared for their time onstage.

## ‘In the morning, I’m mommy’

The sound of children’s voices cuts through the interview, and she apologises. “I should have told you before, I have a three year old and a one year old,” she says with a laugh.

This has shaped a large part of what her day-to-day looks like now, on top of her theatrical responsibilities. “So in the morning, I’m mommy... then I have to audition, rehearse, and prepare the young Simbas and young Nalas for the show.” But despite the demanding nature of juggling her responsibilities, she feels blessed to be where she is today.

As a teacher and a mother now herself, she understands the value of having role models and mentors to help shape who you will become. For her, Jessel Murray and Louis McWilliams were among the faces at DCFA that helped her to achieve her full potential. “I think it’s important to have cornerstones like Jessel Murray and Louis McWilliams,” she says. Her mentors and peers helped instil in her a value for excellence, and for preparation. “Perhaps that is why I have so many of the qualities I have now.”

Lamy-Westcarr’s story is not an unusual one. She mentions that many Trinbagonians have passed through the various *Lion King* companies and made a name for themselves onstage. But she serves as a reminder that with determination and passion, we can find our way to where we are meant to be.

*Amy Li Baksh is a Trinidadian writer, artist and activist.*

■ UWI IN SOCIETY



MEMBERS of the Smart Tables® team (from left) Mr Brendon Bhagwandeem, Ms Amy Khan, Mr Stokeley Smart, Ms Anysha Thomas, Justice Nadia Kangaloo, Mr Kyle Rudden, and Ms Zara-Leigh Lewis at a ceremony hosted by The UWI St Augustine Actuarial Science Club on March 12. PHOTO: ATIBA CUDJOE

# Making the Scales of Justice more Even

## *Smart Tables® tool set to modernise judicial decisions*

BY TYRELL GITTENS

**Traditionally, judges in Trinidad and Tobago's judicial system** have used their discernment when determining how much money to award people in cases related to loss of earnings due to personal injury or death of a loved one. In Trinidad and Tobago, these payments are normally made as a single lump sum.

For these compensations, judges are required to make complex calculations, which must account for factors like mortality rates and future interest rates, amongst other variables.

The local process is set to be digitised and modernised with the Smart Tables®.

Launched on December 4, 2025, the tool was developed by Senior UWI St Augustine Actuarial Science Lecturer and Programme Director, Stokeley Smart, leading an interdisciplinary team of experts.

In a recent interview, Smart gave a look at the process of creating the Smart Tables® and explained how the tool will contribute to the development of the local judiciary.

### **Bringing scientific and actuarial principles to judgements**

“There wasn't a robust and quantitative methodology, based on scientific and actuarial principles, to quantify the sums in these types of loss of earnings awards.

“So when these judgements are made, there is a certain arbitrariness to the manner in which these judgements were come up with, and even for similar cases, there is variation from judge to judge,” Smart explained.

The concept for the Smart Tables® was birthed out of conversations between Smart and High Court Judge Justice Nadia Kangaloo.

There was a mutual recognition that an accessible, localised tool to assist with financial compensation was needed.

The idea was also not far-fetched given that there were already the Ogden Tables being used in the United Kingdom since 1984.

The Ogden Tables are actuarial tables used in UK personal injury and fatal accident cases to calculate lump-

sum compensation for future financial losses, such as loss of earnings or care costs.

To create a local version of the tables that was appropriate to the local jurisdiction, Smart and Justice Kangaloo assembled a team of academics, professionals and postgraduate students in 2018.

### **Judges, actuarial scientists, lawyers, and students**

Members of the working group included economist Dr Vaalmikki Arjoon, Simone Balkissoon of the Caribbean Actuarial Association, UWI Actuarial Science lecturer Brendon Bhagwandeem, High Court Judge Justice Christopher Sieuchand, Representative of the Law Association of Trinidad and Tobago Ramnarine Mungroo, and Ronnie Vinda Persad of the Assembly of Southern Lawyers.

Alumni of the UWI St Augustine Actuarial Science programme that contributed work to the development of the tables included Arianna Ali, Kristal Boodram, Valsson Tobias, Cyrus Lakhan, Chandini Gunpat, Zara-Leigh Lewis, and Shastri Singh Doodnath.

A Caribbean Actuarial Association research grant of over US\$13,000 supported work on the project.

Smart shared, “As a fellow of the Society of Actuaries, who also has a law degree, I was well-positioned to come up with the framework and lead a team to work on filling this particular gap that existed in the local judiciary.

“The first step was to go and take a look at the Ogden Tables and see how they worked, as we wanted to replicate exactly the results that they got.

“So, we set up spreadsheets and figured out how to reverse engineer the results that they were getting.”

Part of the work of building a skeletal framework for the Smart Tables, by better understanding the Ogden Tables, was consulting with the UK's Chief Government Actuary via virtual meetings.

Once a skeletal framework for the Smart Tables® was developed from this work, they then continued to tweak it to adapt it to a local context.

### **Mortality tables for Trinidad and Tobago**

“The other aspect of the process of creating the Smart Tables® was sourcing accurate indigenous data for both the Interest Rate Methodology and the Demographic Assumptions that are key inputs into the Smart Tables Methodology.”

“We didn't have indigenous mortality tables for Trinidad and Tobago, so in parallel with developing the Smart Tables, we also created mortality tables.”

Smart detailed the mortality table was created using population mortality data from the employed persons mortality table using empirical data from the National Insurance Board.

With proper mortality tables in place and the framework of the Smart Tables® fully developed, it was peer-reviewed by Chris Daykin, who worked on the original Ogden Tables back in 1984.

In December 2025, the website for the Smart Tables® was rolled out during a launch ceremony at the Main Salon of the Campus Principal's Office.

### **Smart Tables to be used soon**

People can expect the Smart Tables® to be used in local judicial cases starting soon, which means that judges who use the tool will no longer have to do complex calculations to determine lump-sum compensations.

“All I can say, at this stage, is that the Smart Tables® are being introduced to the system. Very soon, there will be cases in the public record which will make mention of the tool being used,” said Smart.

Other jurisdictions may soon also find value in the Smart Tables® as it was designed to be adaptable for jurisdictions around the world that are based on British common law.

In November 2025, Smart and his team won Best Research Team at the UWI Principal's Awards for work on the Smart Tables® and its sub-projects, including the creation of mortality tables for Trinidad and Tobago.

## HEALTH



Attendees at the 16th Caribbean Conference on National Health Financing Initiatives in Nassau.

## A Digital Revolution for Caribbean Healthcare?

*Health, Finance, and Information Systems professionals gather for regional conference on the technology's benefits and costs*

**Digitalisation of the health sector promises major benefits** for patient care, innovation and efficiency in operations. But who is accounting for the cost and financing implications of these initiatives?

These issues and the quest for Caribbean-based solutions were addressed by health financing experts, information systems professionals, health managers, and other professionals at the 16th Caribbean Conference on National Health Financing Initiatives. The conference, themed “Information Systems, AI and Data Analytics in Health: Managing Costs, Optimising Benefits for the Caribbean”, was held at the Margaritaville Beach Resort in Nassau, The Bahamas in October 2025.

The conference was co-hosted by The UWI's Centre for Health Economics (HEU), and the National Health Insurance Authority of The Bahamas, with support from regional and international partners. Around 90 participants from 19 Caribbean and other countries attended, representing ministries of health, national health insurance agencies, hospitals, universities, insurers, and health technology organisations. This broad participation encouraged open discussion across policy, operational, legal, technological and financial perspectives.

The conference was formally opened by Dr Michael Darville, Minister of Health and Wellness of The Bahamas. Over the three days, it featured presentations and discussions on how artificial intelligence and digitalisation are being used in health systems, the costs and benefits of health information systems, and how advancing technology can improve quality and efficiency.

Country and institutional presentations shared real-world experiences from national health insurance agencies, health financing bodies, and hospitals across the Caribbean and Latin America. Many countries reported improvements in administrative efficiency, claims processing, financial oversight, and access to data as a result of digitalisation. At the same time, presenters acknowledged ongoing challenges, including system integration problems, limited technical capacity, training needs, cybersecurity risks, and concerns about long-term sustainability.

Sessions focused on cross-cutting issues that affect the success of digital health reforms. Particular attention was given to the legal and regulatory issues surrounding artificial intelligence in healthcare decision-making, such as encouraging innovation amidst notable gaps in existing laws related to liability, informed consent, data protection, and accountability.

Presenters and participants highlighted that investment in information technology, digitalisation, and artificial intelligence is essential for modern health systems, but must be carefully planned, regularly evaluated, and managed to ensure value for money, particularly in small, resource-constrained countries.

A special panel of experts discussed whether the Caribbean was on track to achieve Universal Health Coverage by 2030. Participants noted that while many countries have progressed in expanding access to essential health services, significant challenges remained, including high out-of-pocket health costs for some households, unmet health needs, inequalities in access to care, long waiting times, shortages of health professionals, and infrastructure gaps. The panel explored ways to address these issues, such as improving efficiency through digitalisation, using performance-based financing, introducing earmarked health taxes, strengthening public-private partnerships, and exploring new financing approaches.

The 17th conference is planned for Bermuda in 2026 with the theme, “Resilient Health Financing Systems in the Caribbean: Confronting Change, Transition and Transformation”.

## CULTURE

**A bird's-eye view of the life of a legendary steelband man who grew up in San Fernando.**

This how Dr Jeannine Remy, music lecturer at the Department of Creative and Festival Arts (DCFA) describes her book, *The Saga of Milton Wire Austin and the Fonclaire Steel Orchestra*.

Dr Remy's work chronicles the life of the celebrated pan man known fondly as “Wire”, who led Fonclaire Steel Orchestra for 50 years.

The book launch was held on January 22, 2026 at the UWI RBL DCFA Building on Gordon Street, St Augustine. Dr Remy, a Senior Lecturer at DCFA, shared historical highlights and photographs of the Fonclaire Steel Orchestra that she collected through interviews with Milton Wire Austin between 2016 and 2020, and artefacts from his personal archives.

The launch also featured presentations by Dr Lorraine Nero Senior Librarian and Head of the West Indiana and Special Collections at The UWI's Alma Jordan Library and Mr Darren Sheppard, current Managing Director and arranger of the Fonclaire Steel Orchestra. Ms Opal Murrell performed on the tenor pan.

Dr Remy explained that the 150-page book outlines a decade-by-decade history of the steelband, from its inception in 1965, to Mr Austin's death in 2020. Filled with historical photos, newspaper clippings, and quotes from Wire, the book also includes many sidebars featuring significant members of the band who reflected on their involvement in Fonclaire under his leadership.

Dr Remy teaches steelpan and percussion, pan arranging, composition, and steelpan history. She is also the Director of UWI Arts Percussion Ensemble. She has dedicated her academic career to arranging, composition, and scholarly research.

In her presentation, Dr Nero described Remy as “the flag woman of steelpan research”. She discussed several similar collaborations between Dr. Remy and the West Indiana Collection over more than 20 years and urged members of other steelbands to reach out to have their content scanned and included in The UWI's digital library to ensure their place in the historical record.

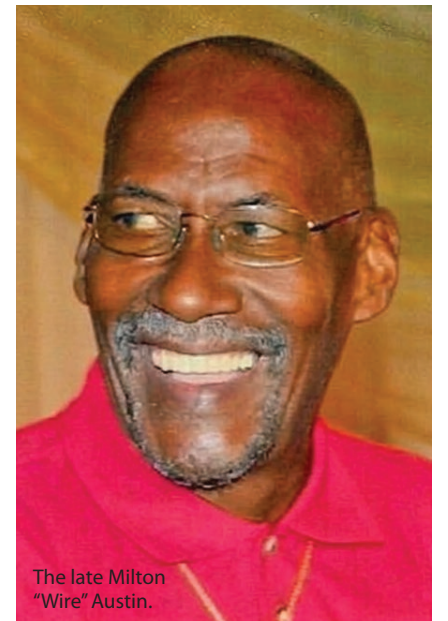
Mr Sheppard spoke on behalf of the Fonclaire Steel Orchestra. He explained the importance of sponsorship to steelbands and the need to preserve the community and location of Fonclaire. Sheppard commented on his own experiences in the band as a player, arranger and leader over the years.

Besides this latest work, Dr Remy has published numerous articles on steelpan history and development. Her work has been featured in *When Steel Talks*, *Caribbean Beat*, *Pan Podium*, and *Percussive Notes*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Percussive Arts Society in the United States. She has co-authored books on the Invaders Steel Orchestra and the Northern Illinois Steel Band.

## Telling the story of Fonclaire's Milton 'Wire' Austin

*DCFA Music lecturer Dr Jeannine Remy's new book looks at the life and legacy of a celebrated steelband man*

Dr Jeannine Remy signing copies of her new book at the launch.



The late Milton “Wire” Austin.

# Canada, Caribbean Deepen Partnership to TACKLE SECURITY CHALLENGES

As Canada and the Caribbean confront an increasingly complex web of traditional and emerging security threats, the 4th Annual Canada-Caribbean Institute Research Symposium opened with a clear call to action: the region must secure its future through deeper collaboration and evidence-based solutions.

Addressing delegates at the Centre for Language Learning at UWI St Augustine on February 19, 2026, UWI Vice-Chancellor Professor Sir Hilary Beckles traced the Canada-Caribbean partnership to its deeper geopolitical roots. He described it as one of the most significant bridges and expressions of multilateralism in the 20th century, with Canada emerging as a steadfast ally at a defining moment in regional history.

Dr Rhonda McEwen, President and Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University in the University of Toronto and Co-Chair of the Canada-Caribbean Institute, underscored the significance behind this year's theme, "*Securing Our Future: Positioning Our Region to Address Traditional and Emerging Security Challenges*".

Dr McEwen highlighted that among the themes explored were economic social security, digital governance, cultural reparation, mental health and youth futures, among others. She reminded the audience of the complexity and interconnectedness of the challenges faced and also affirmed the power of collaboration, dialogue and shared purpose.

Delivering the feature address, the former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, Mr Bob Rae, broadened the discussion to the structural realities facing small states. He underscored the necessity of deeper regional cooperation to secure meaningful global engagement and sustainable expansion.

"This needs to be led by the Caribbean countries but with assistance from the outside," said Mr Rae. "This is the moral and right thing to do as the Caribbean has been plundered for several hundred years by imperial powers that have done very well out of the situation."

Mr Michael Ryan Callan, High Commissioner for Canada to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, suggested several ways the Caribbean and Canada can diversify their interests for sustainable growth and economic sovereignty. These included expanding the Caribbean/Canada Free Trade Agreement (CARIBCAN); an expansion of the planned T&T Chamber of Commerce trade mission to Canada to include other Caribbean partners; and a regional assessment of security to see how best Canada can further shared security interests.

Senator Dr Natalie Chaitan-Maharaj, Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services noted that, "This symposium provides a valuable space for dialogue, evidence-based analysis, and the exchange of ideas that can shape practical solutions."

Dr Chaitan-Maharaj noted, "Partnerships will be between academia, governments, civil society and are essential to position our region to respond effectively for both present and future challenges."

UWI St Augustine Campus Principal Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine noted that Small Island Developing States continue to grapple with entrenched security concerns—including transnational crime, illegal migration, border vulnerabilities and climate change—while simultaneously navigating rising technological and cyber threats, mental health pressures, cultural erosion and identity-based insecurity. She emphasised that the Institute has evolved into a critical platform for advancing cooperative, research-driven responses between Canada and the Caribbean, strengthening the region's collective



Former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, Mr Bob Rae.

"This is the moral and right thing to do as the Caribbean has been plundered for several hundred years by imperial powers that have done very well out of the situation."



FROM LEFT: President of George Brown Polytechnic Dr Gervan Fearon; former Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations Mr Bob Rae; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Global Affairs at The UWI Ms Sandra Maynard; Campus Principal of UWI St Augustine Professor Rose-Marie Belle Antoine; President and Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University in the University of Toronto Dr Rhonda McEwen; Professor Selwyn Cudjoe, Chairman of the Board of the University of Trinidad and Tobago; High Commissioner for Canada to Trinidad and Tobago Mr Michael Callan; and Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Behavioural Sciences at UWI St Augustine Dr Talia Esnard, at the 4th Annual CCI Research Symposium 2026, held at the Centre for Language Learning Auditorium, UWI St Augustine, on 19 February 2026.

capacity to confront today's risks and anticipate tomorrow's uncertainties.

Building on her call for deeper regional alignment, Professor Antoine framed the Canada-Caribbean partnership not simply as diplomatic co-operation, but as a relationship grounded in shared values and mutual trust. She stressed that confronting today's complex security landscape requires alliances anchored in principle and purpose.

Highlighting The UWI's leadership role, Professor Antoine said that The UWI's academic community is actively shaping regional and global discussions in areas such as climate change, AI ethics, social justice, reparations and culture. Professor Antoine stated that the Institute enables UWI scholars to extend their influence through close collaboration with Canadian counterparts, institutions and policymakers, and vice versa. She underscored that as a developmental university, The UWI was created with a specific mandate to serve the region, and she maintained that The UWI cannot afford to be a passive observer, but

must continue to act as an architect of resilience in the Caribbean.

Dr Gervan Fearon, President of George Brown Polytechnic, talked about the importance of these relationships and stated, "At a global level, it's very important for regions, for countries, to be an exemplars of what is possible between people—to be able to build on shared history, shared relationships—to be exemplars, to inspire humanity on options as to how we solve problems."

The Institute was founded six years ago, and this is the fourth time the symposium has been held. The event offers a unique opportunity to hear directly from influential leaders shaping diplomacy, regional security, higher education, and public policy across Canada and the Caribbean. These voices offer a premier platform for advancing evidence-based dialogue on governance, crime and justice reform, climate resilience, digital transformation, and sustainable development.

CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (CLL) OPEN HOUSE 2026

# Culture Beyond Borders



From calligraphy to crepe-making, dance tutorials to interactive displays, on March 13 and 14, the St Augustine campus came alive with an estimated 2,000 visitors for The Centre for Language Learning's (CLL's) Open House 2026.

The CLL Open House is a triennial event that lets participants “experience a world of languages through hands-on fun”, the centre states.

“We had a wide range of activities that covered the following languages taught at the CLL: Chinese, ESL, French, German, Japanese, Spanish and Yoruba. Although we do not teach Korean, we also had two Korean workshops,” said Ms Janine Lutchman-Nkouetang, Administrative Assistant (Outreach) at CLL.

Activities included horseback riding; wine and cheese tasting; cooking demonstrations; German, Japanese and Korean calligraphy workshops; interactive displays; karaoke; craft-making; language games; photobooths; musical performances; dance tutorials; and information sessions on opportunities to study abroad.



## The UWI Calendar of Events March–April 2026

**Open Days 2026**  
**March 28 and 29**  
**St Augustine Campus**

Thinking about the possibilities in higher education? Come explore The UWI St Augustine campus with a guided campus tour. Discover the academic programme that will help you achieve your career and life goals. Chat with staff and students to truly understand the “UWI experience”. Hear about the vast range of opportunities available to you while studying, and learn how you can finance your educational future. All this in two fun days of games, food, contests, dance, and music at Open Days 2026.

**For updates, visit The UWI St Augustine website at [sta.uwi.edu/](http://sta.uwi.edu/), or on social media at [facebook.com/UWISTA](https://www.facebook.com/UWISTA), [twitter.com/uwi\\_staugustine](https://twitter.com/uwi_staugustine), and [linkedin.com/school/uwistaugustine/](https://www.linkedin.com/school/uwistaugustine/). To attend, register at <https://sta.uwi.edu/opendays/>**

**SAVE THE DATES**

**UWI OPEN DAYS 2026**  
**March 28 & 29**

**Possibilities await.**  
**REGISTER NOW!**

**International Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Tourism Conference**  
**March 31 to April 1**  
**St Augustine Campus**

The Faculty of Food and Agriculture in collaboration with Banwari Experience Limited is pleased to host this conference themed: “From Soil to Society: Advancing Food and Nutrition Security, Cultural Gastronomy, and Sustainable Tourism to achieve the SDGs”. Join this timely discussion examining the vital role of culture in promoting planetary health, alongside food and nutrition security.

**For more information, visit [conferences.sta.uwi.edu/food-nutrition-security](http://conferences.sta.uwi.edu/food-nutrition-security), email [treasure.alcindor@uwi.edu](mailto:treasure.alcindor@uwi.edu) or call (868) 662-2002 Ext. 82210. Register at [conferences.sta.uwi.edu/food-nutrition-security/registration/](http://conferences.sta.uwi.edu/food-nutrition-security/registration/)**

