

EDUCATION IN CRISIS

The story, "Big Jump in UG Enrolment", provided useful statistics about the University of Guyana. But behind the figures is a tale of how not to do it and why Guyana, like so many third world countries, is today in serious trouble.

Enrolment for the 1987/1988 academic year, the story indicated, passed the 2,000 mark. The last highest enrolment was 1,913 in the 1975-76 academic year. The new enrolment is a 25% increase on the school year 1986-87.

This big jump in student population is attributed to the re-introduction of evening degree programmes for which 322 persons registered.

UNESCO

The University of Guyana was established in the early 1960's by the government of the People's Progressive Party (PPP).

As Premier, I had sought advice from UNESCO. After studying the problem, the specialists had indicated that it would have taken about 3 years to establish the University. That period, we were told, was required to get the necessary buildings and to secure academic staff.

We were not happy with the advice and said so bluntly to the advisers. We wanted to make a quick start.

We succeeded in setting up the University within a year on an evening school basis by using the premises of the secondary school, Queens College, which was vacated by 3 p.m. This was based on my experience as a student in the USA. While a full-time day student at North-Western University Dental School, I did simultaneously a social sciences degree course at the YMCA College (now Roosevelt College) in Chicago by attending evening classes.

As regards staff, I knew several professors who had been dismissed during the McCarthyite red witch-hunting era in the 1950's in the United States. We were able to obtain the services of several of them. And the eminent Professor William Hogben from England headed the University.

The then opposition People's National Congress (PNC) attacked the project and called the University "Jagan's night-school". Their supporters were instructed to boycott it.

CHANGES

After the ouster of the PPP from government, two things happened : funds were adequately provided for the construction of the University Buildings at Turkeyen; a move was made to change the image of the University. Pressure was put on many academics and they were forced to leave. Subsequently, the eminently-qualified Dr. Walter Rodney was denied employment.

In the early 1970s, evening tuition was abandoned. Daytime instruction only and no dormitory accommodation, however, created a problem of student intake.

This was compounded by the decision in 1974 when the government decided to make it compulsory for women students to do National Service in the Interior. More than a hundred students dropped out.

A "solution" was found in the granting of scholarships to government employees and the enrollment of a large number of National Service personnel as part-time students. All this was facilitated by a big windfall of nearly \$500 million in the 1974-76 period from sugar and bauxite levies.

However, with a severe financial crisis and an agreement with the IMF in 1978, funds for social services in general and education in particular were cut. This affected the quality of education at all levels, including the University.

A research study by David Cox of the University of Guyana indicated depressing results. Between 1979 and 1984 in Guyana, the number of entrants for the GCE O'Level examination declined from 10,697 to 4,579 and the number of passes from 2031 to 908. For English Literature 4,210 entered and 915 passed in 1979; whereas in 1984 only 1,287 entered and a mere 270 passed.

BACK TO SQUARE ONE

Consequently, it was difficult to get enough students who had passed 4 or 5 subjects at GCE at one sitting. Thus University entrance requirement was scaled down. At the same time, the government, faced with severe financial problems, began to cut back on the number of student scholarships.

The University thus found itself in a position with less and less students and without adequate funds for upkeep of the University buildings, for library books, laboratory equipment, chemicals, etc. The authorities therefore went back to square one -- evening courses.

SHOWPIECES

The case of the University of Guyana is a good example of the method of operation of many third world countries. They believe in show more than content.

Not prepared to go in for a policy of sacrifice and self-reliance, they look for hand-outs and loans from overseas to build showpieces. In the end, the loans become a burden on the country, especially when a dependent capitalist-oriented development strategy is pursued. The repayment of debts leads to huge budgetary deficits and shortage of foreign exchange. Both bedevil educational and other standards. As long ago as 1974, the Minister of Education had disclosed that "three-quarters of the children coming out of primary schools could not read properly".

Third world leaders could draw many lessons from the Guyanese experience. The "cadillac mentality" and "Western lifestyles" greatly contributed to the problems of underdevelopment.

Other contributory factors have been discriminatory practices in the employment of academic staff and in the enrollment of students in order to effect political control.

I personally am glad that the University authorities have decided to return to evening classes. This will permit the working people to secure an education, which otherwise they would not be able to afford. It will also help to facilitate the democratisation of the society.

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