

The Clinical Translational Research Unit (CTRU): The New Core of the Faculty of Medical Sciences Research Enterprise

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The Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS) has a long history of producing seminal work across a wide range of clinical and scientific disciplines. This work has contributed to the research enterprise of the University of the West Indies (UWI) as a premier higher education institution with strong roots in the Caribbean and expanding globally. With 76 years of service to the Caribbean community, the FMS has an impressive group of multi-disciplinary stakeholders in health research who consistently guide decision-making which informs clinical practice and public health policy across local, regional, and international landscapes (1–3).

The global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2019–2020 academic year presented an unprecedented challenge to universities worldwide, including the UWI. The importance of the leadership of medical faculties in exploring systems to strengthen research capacity has been highlighted in recent post-pandemic studies from both developed and developing countries (4–9). During this period, the FMS experienced a decrease in research output, both in the number of publications and clinical trial registration (Figure 1A and B). In response, the faculty had to swiftly adapt, recalibrate and transform its research systems. However, this period of upheaval also presented an opportunity for self-reflection, organizational restructuring and the identification of new research directions. It allowed the FMS to strengthen existing partnerships, explore emerging areas of research, and reimagine the future of the faculty. This culminated in the Clinical Translational Research Unit (CTRU) of the Dean's Office of FMS; an initiative that marked a new era of research collaboration and innovation. The CTRU evolved from the Health Research Resource Unit, initially created to provide methodological and data analytical support for faculty research, the Clinical Trials Centre which coordinated and implemented clinical trials, as well as the

Translational Innovative Entity which provided entrepreneurial support to faculty and students.

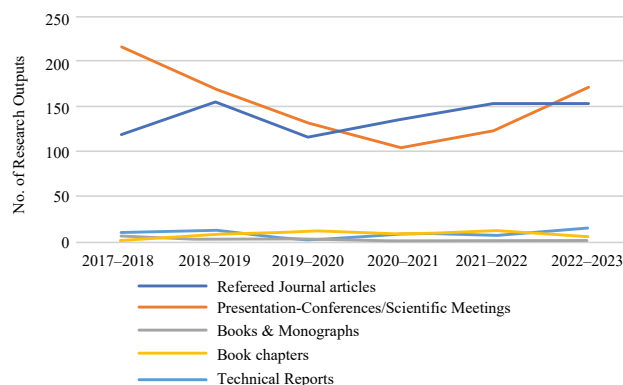


Figure 1A. Trend in FMS research outputs for academic years 2017/18–2022/23.

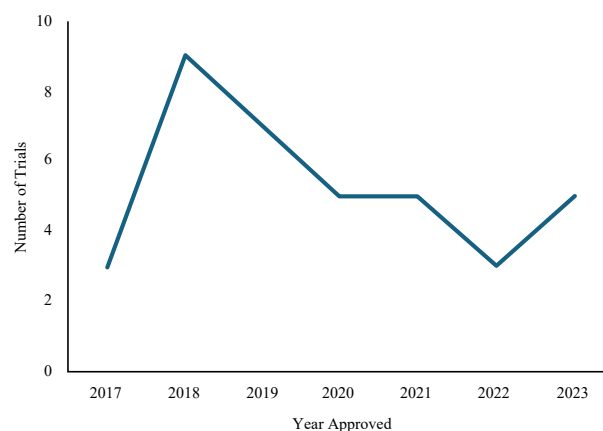


Figure 1B. Clinical trials register by FMS on Clinicaltrials.gov between 2017 and 2023.

CTRU Organizational Structure

The CTRU structure, which reports to the Dean, includes a full time Research Manager, Deputy Dean of Research, Biostatistician/Epidemiologist support, Librarian assigned to the faculty, Faculty multimedia/information technology support, and administrator assistant support. The Unit introduced Research Liaison

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Officers within all clinical and non-clinical departments. Nominated by the Heads of Departments, these officers serve as the critical link between their respective departments and the CTRU. Working closely with the heads of departments, these representatives facilitate research development across departments and are given the task of ensuring that departmental research activities align with the faculty research goals. Additional expertise is invited as needed for special activities such as for the mounting of training workshops and research conference activities. Through the concerted efforts of the CTRU, the research publication and clinical trial registration output for 2022–2023 reflected a trajectory toward pre-pandemic levels.

CTRU Mission and Strategic Goals

The mission of CTRU is to enhance the research capacity of FMS, positioning it as a key driver of scientific advancement. The unit operates under primary objectives designed to foster a robust research ecosystem and the strategies employed focus on research capacity training, consultations, supporting access to research resources and ensuring that research outputs are effectively communicated (Table 1).

CTRU offers a wide range of services to support the primary objectives, including:

1. **Training Workshops/Seminars/Webinars/Journal Club Support:** The CTRU provides targeted training for faculty members, and post-graduate students. Training workshops, webinars and seminars are conducted throughout the academic year

to enhance research competencies. A key initiative of the CTRU is the revitalization of journal clubs, which will serve as central hubs for academic engagement and research exchange.

2. **Resource Repository Development:** Since the inception of CTRU, continuous training activities have been organized and delivered. These include the FMS Research Toolkit, *Design to Publication—A Practical Guide*, which was launched in 2023 in celebration of the 75th anniversary of the UWI. This comprehensive resource, grounded in translational science principles, guides users through seven key stages of the research process—from conceptualization to publication. It includes a range of supplementary materials, such as a video masterclass series and a Research Conceptualization Template designed to assist researchers in developing strong research proposals. These resources are housed on the UWI online learning platform which is accessible to all faculty and registered students. The resources are also available on the FMS YouTube channel. Complementing the resources developed by the unit are the resources on the UWI online learning platform provided by our Library partners which include training material on engaging with library services, avoiding plagiarism, proper use of citation managers and expert navigation of the publication landscape.

3. **Research Liaison Officers Support:** The CTRU, in partnership with these officers, ensures

Table 1. Primary objectives and strategies of the CTRU

Primary objectives	Strategies of CTRU
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Capacity Building for Researchers in the Health Sciences: The CTRU aims to cultivate a cadre of researchers who can generate reproducible, responsible, and high-impact research within a culturally informed and ethical framework. The research generated should tackle problems of national and international significance, yielding competitive research grants, high-quality journal publications and cogent evidence-based policy and practice guidelines. 2. Development of Academic Leaders: The CTRU strives to produce future academic leaders proficient in communicating biomedical science and contributing meaningfully to global research discussions. 3. Promoting Multi-disciplinary Collaboration: A cornerstone of the CTRU's vision is the fostering of a multi-disciplinary approach to problem-solving, allowing for innovative and comprehensive solutions to complex scientific and health challenges. 4. Facilitating Translation into Practice and Policy: The CTRU seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that scientific findings are translated into actionable policies and interventions. 5. Establishing Research Repositories: A key focus is the creation and maintenance of well-characterized information and biorepositories, ensuring that these resources facilitate efficient data sharing and future collaborations. 	<div> <p>Research Capacity Training: Developing the skills of faculty members and students to improve research design, execution, and dissemination.</p> <p>Consultations and Technical Reviews: Providing expert guidance to strengthen research proposals and methodologies.</p> <p>Research Platforms: Supporting access to tools and resources to aid in research development.</p> <p>Knowledge Management and Dissemination Ensuring that research outputs are effectively communicated and shared within and beyond the faculty.</p> </div>

continuous research development at the department level with the inclusion of both staff and students. The initiatives encouraged include regular journal club meetings, research project discussion forums, ethical review consultations, basic biostatistics support, assisting with clinical trial registration, and formation of paper writing groups to increase publication output. CTRU holds regular meetings with these officers to gather information on best practices and the specific needs of each department.

4. **Clinical Trial Support for Startup and Monitoring:** The CTRU provides oversight for all clinical trials of the faculty. By supporting researchers, the established UWI protocol for registration and monitoring are ensured. The unit also supports patient safety monitoring and adverse event reporting needs.
5. **Research Output Analysis:** The CTRU is developing systems to monitor and track departmental research activities, providing a clear overview of progress in relation to the FMS research agenda. These systems will allow for real-time reporting on research outputs. The CTRU also provides robust publication support, ensuring that prospective authors have the resources they need to publish in high-impact journals.
6. **Consultation and Communication:** In addition to the business meetings with Research Liaison Officers, updates and resources are disseminated to the full faculty through the FMS email platform and during regular departmental meetings. Information shared includes internal and external collaboration opportunities, grant funding opportunities and postgraduate training opportunities. The unit is accessible to the faculty for support with grant applications, project management guidance and facilitating research innovations. Other initiatives include continuous needs assessment systems to identify gaps in skills, resources, and the creation of research data repositories.

In conclusion, the vision of the leadership of the FMS, including the Dean and the Heads of Departments, the capacity building through the CTRU is positively impacting the research output of FMS. Through strategic next steps focusing on maintaining a collaborative, inclusive approach with our Research Liaison Officers, research supervisors, students, technical and administrative support, the CTRU will continue to elevate the research enterprise of the FMS.

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