

Challenges In Higher Education



Competitive Environment

When an economy is shrinking, enrolment in tertiary level institutions rises as persons seek to pursue new careers, acquire knowledge and upgrade their skills to prepare them for better job opportunities.

The Planning Institute of Jamaica (PIOJ) has indicated that the demand for tertiary education in Jamaica grew by 40% between 2005 and 2010 moving from just below 49,000 to more than 68,000 in five years.

This is a promising trend and indicates how well citizens understand that tertiary education is vital to their personal success and the country's competitiveness and eventual economic growth. But in acquiring tertiary education affordability is a critical component.

Any expectation that this increase would have been mirrored in our enrolment has been tempered by reality. Competition to fill the growing demand for tertiary education has become fierce in recent times. Aided by technology, many private overseas institutions are extending the virtual borders of their campuses by establishing teaching and research platforms for potential students anywhere they are in the world. We have witnessed many of them sprouting in the Jamaican marketplace.

Reduced Budgetary Support

As governments seek to grapple with dire economic situations globally, reduced budgetary support for tertiary education institutions has become the reality. The national budget of Jamaica is greatly influenced by the demands of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme and more importantly, a shift in attitude away from support for higher education, in favour of early childhood, primary and secondary levels education, as well as vocational training.

Mona's Response to Challenges

Responses to these economic challenges by public institutions across the developed world range from capping enrolment - closing applications several months early, to scrapping academic programmes, laying off Faculty and scaling down administrative functions.

It is heartening that UWI, Mona has avoided taking drastic belt-tightening measures chiefly because we usually come back to this question: What is our core mission?

At the heart of this university is its academic energy which leads to knowledge creation, knowledge development and knowledge transfer. As the Region's leading institution of higher learning, we deem it critical that we continue to create new opportunities to strengthen our competitiveness and to support our students' academic pursuits.

Mona's response to the challenging environment includes commencing the processes for accreditation with the University Council of Jamaica, to formalise and strengthen the quality assurance mechanisms that the UWI has developed over the years, as well as to counter the general trend of universities operating in the English-speaking Caribbean using accreditation as a cachet in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

In the absence of a viable regional accrediting body, Mona has sought accreditation from the University Council of Jamaica (UCJ); St. Augustine



from the Accrediting Council of Trinidad & Tobago; and Cave Hill and the Open Campus from the Barbados Accreditation Council, with all three Councils agreeing to grant reciprocal recognition to institutions accredited by them.

Further, the Mona School of Business (MSB) has received accreditation from the International Association of MBA's (AMBA) for achieving what the AMBA has described as the highest standard in post-graduate Business Education for its EMBA & MBA programmes. AMBAs accreditation is only accorded to Business Schools with the "best programmes", and is internationally recognised as the global standard for all MBA, MBM and DBA programmes.

The screenshot shows a red-themed web interface for 'OurVLE'. At the top left is a decorative header featuring a crest and the letters 'OurVLE'. Below it, the text 'MD61A: Continuing Medical Education' is displayed. A navigation bar at the bottom includes links for 'OurVLE' and 'MUNA'. On the right side of the header, there are two small buttons: 'Switch role to...' and 'Turn editing on'. The main content area is currently empty.

Other initiatives include:

- Ensuring active communication with potential students providing them with on-going, relevant information to aid their decision.
- Streamlining the admission process to reduce turnaround time between application, offer and acceptance and ultimately registration.
- Settling Faculty course schedule before the start of the school year so that students in general, and working students in particular, can plan ahead, including requesting time-off from work.
- Optimizing the use of fulltime Faculty to ensure students are exposed to the best academic expertise at Mona while reducing the need for adjunct staff.
- Engaging flexible delivery modes to improve access and respond to market needs.
- Using technology to address the limitations of the physical plant.

More than 1,500 courses are now offered online in OurVLE - the Campus' virtual learning environment - with as many as 5,519 campus users accessing these courses in 2010/2011. OurVLE now facilitates a total of 35,222 users including academic and administrative staff and students from across the Caribbean.

Video conferencing technology connects multiple locations during lectures, for example lecturing to students at Mona and the Western Jamaica Campus simultaneously, with two-way interaction.

Initiatives to help our students deal with financial challenges include:

- Expanding scholarship and other financial support programmes.
- Increasing employment opportunities for students working as library assistants and security/courtesy officers at various campus locations; and boosting peer-to-peer learning centres with earning opportunities for 250 students.
- Creating outsourcing jobs with significant employment potential at the newly constructed 1,000 seat call centre.
- Reorganizing Radio Mona to offer students opportunities to earn while they learn.
- Introducing payment plan facility for financially challenged students and also providing them with information on the Student Loan process.
- Relaxing the criteria for deregistration so that this becomes a last resort.

