

The Future of Research in the Caribbean: The Roles and Responsibilities of Caribbean Scholars in Producing Knowledge for the Region (Elevating the Research Role of Scholars in Caribbean Universities)

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Role of the University

Approximately 172 years ago, Newman wrote that a university is “a place where inquiry is pushed forward and discoveries verified and proved” (Newman, 1852). Research where inquiry is pushed forward and discovery verified and proved, remains at the centre of the mission of the modern university. Universities provide the best environment for scholars to pursue research and generate knowledge.

The discussion in this article will focus primarily on the role of scholars in Anglo-Caribbean universities. While teaching is an important responsibility of a university, for Caribbean institutions research should be equally important, if not more important, at this juncture of Caribbean development. Scholars in Caribbean institutions have a responsibility to pursue research and knowledge generation to support the development of the Region.

In fact, universities in the Region should function primarily as research universities, where research is the paramount responsibility of scholars in these institutions. Altbach (2007), well known for his work on universities in developing countries, defines research universities as “academic institutions committed

to the creation and dissemination of knowledge in a range of disciplines and fields and featuring the appropriate laboratories, libraries and other infrastructures that permit teaching and research at the highest possible level” (p. 112). They are institutions where research and graduate studies are dominant. Altbach (2007) regards the research university as a central institution of the 21st century that is essential for the creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Altbach (2007) expressed the view that while developing countries need research universities to participate in the prevailing knowledge and service-oriented economy of the 21st century, the goals must necessarily be tempered when compared with those of research universities in large industrialised countries. In his view, research universities in developing countries should not seek to compete with research universities in the large industrialised countries. Rather, they should seek to compete with second-rank, distinguished research universities in the industrialised world.

In my view, while resource availability might well be a constraining factor in the range and magnitude of research that universities

in developing countries such as those in the Caribbean may be able to undertake, the quality and value of the research undertaken should not be competitive only with second-ranked universities of large industrialised countries. Rather, Caribbean universities should aim to be among the best in the world with respect to their research contribution pertinent to the development of the Region. While the focus of their research may also be different from those of universities in industrialised countries, they should aim to be no less valued for their contribution to development—in this case, regional development.

The excellence of the scholarship of The University of the West Indies which serves primarily (though not exclusively) the development needs of the Anglo-Caribbean countries, cannot go unnoticed. Partly because of the impact of its research in addressing both local and global needs, this University in 2022 was ranked among the top 1.5% in a field of some 30,000 universities and elite research institutes worldwide (<https://www.mona.uwi.edu/news/uwi-soars-top-latest-latest-universities-rankings>).

Guarding Against Pessimism of Scholarly Research

Universities in the Caribbean and the research their scholars undertake are important for the generation of knowledge to support the development of the Region. It is important that they maintain a profile of respect in the Region for this important mission. They should guard against the type of perception that Zha (2024) reported for universities in the United States. Zha called attention to considerable scepticism that had developed in universities, even in the most advanced systems like that of the United States. According to Zha:

A recent survey administered by the Wall Street Journal and the University of Chicago found that 56 percent of Americans lost faith in university education, up from 40 percent in 2013. Such skepticism is strongest among people aged 18–34 (the most relevant age group to university education), and among people with university degrees. (p. 32)

Zha (2024) pointed out that this skepticism is observed in other countries as well, and that it signals a demand for profound changes in higher education in the years to come. Caribbean universities must take note of these developments and take steps to guard against such decline in the interest and the value of their contribution to the Region. The pursuit of socially and developmentally relevant research by scholars in these institutions will sustain and enhance the esteem in which they are held in the Region.

Research scholars in Caribbean universities should establish a collaborative working relationship with national and regional policy makers and practitioners in their respective areas of research. Such collaboration must be undertaken in a spirit of partnership with due consideration and weighting given to the inputs of the national and regional policy makers and practitioners. Though some time has passed since the Tooley and Darby (1998) Report to the Office of Standards in Education (OFSTED), there are still lessons to be learned from the findings. The 1998 Tooley and Darby Report reviewed 264 research articles in top-rated British educational research journals. Forty-one of these articles were reviewed in greater detail. The findings were quite disturbing and prompted Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in writing the Foreword to the Report to remark that:

Educational research is not making the contribution it should. Much that is published is, on this analysis, at best no more than an irrelevance and distraction. To justify the expenditure of significant sums of public money, research must both illuminate issues of importance to teachers and exemplify the intellectual integrity upon which the pursuit of excellence ultimately depends. (Tooley & Darby, 1998, p. 1)

Even though Mortimore (2000) felt that "this criticism was wide of the mark" (p. 16), the press release by the UK Government was widely disseminated and this, of course, generated a number of questions about the research done by universities. More recently, Tucker et al. (2019) called attention to the fact that despite the emphasis that many universities place on

the pivotal importance of research, concerns prevail about the effectiveness of research in influencing not only teaching and learning, but practice as well.

The foregoing discussion points to the perception of a level of disconnect between the research work undertaken by a university and its usefulness to practitioners in the field. The scepticism about the value of university research cannot be ignored by scholars in Caribbean universities. Scholars in the Region's universities must take steps to build and strengthen the relationship with government institutions and agencies as well as the private sector in undertaking research that is relevant to their development needs. The pursuit of research that is helpful in guiding decision making for the intended beneficiaries should be of paramount importance for scholars in universities in Caribbean countries.

A central consideration should be that the research agenda of Caribbean scholars must respond to the needs of the local private sector and to the economic, social, cultural, educational, and political issues with which the Region is grappling. This imperative is well summed up by Altbach (2007):

Local research universities are the only institutions able to give attention to local needs. They understand the specific problems of the country in which they are located and can focus on these themes. External institutions have neither the interest nor the knowledge to do so. (p. 130)

However, Sutz (2005) lamented that many universities in the developing world have a bias towards basic, rather than applied research. She notes that this bias makes it challenging to establish institutional links with industry. Caribbean scholars would be well advised to give special attention to building relationships with industry. Not only would industry provide valuable opportunities for scholars of Caribbean universities to pursue useful research, but the relationship with industry is also likely to provide additional funding for the research they undertake.

Building Expertise for the Future

As the global transformation of economies continues through the digital age to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, into a world of artificial intelligence and virtual reality, our capacity to survive and develop as a Caribbean Region must not be taken lightly. These developments have brought new socio-economic and political challenges to which the Region must respond. Under these circumstances, increased attention must be given to the role of regional universities in providing the required research for the generation of knowledge to equip citizens and countries with expertise that is pivotal to their development in this changing environment. Caribbean universities must be at the forefront of research that will help the Region to take advantage of the current state of knowledge and adapt it, indeed build on it, to ensure that we continue to have our fair share of the benefits from the global economy.

While the research contribution of scholars in Caribbean universities may transcend national and regional needs and impact the needs of the wider global community, the core research mission should be to undertake research that is relevant to regional socio-economic development needs. Equally important, these scholars should train a cadre of students to engage in research that responds to the needs of countries in the Region. These budding research scholars and professionals should be guided to focus their research on national and regional needs.

Altbach (2013) points out that while some research universities are large and multifaceted, some may be smaller institutions which concentrate on a narrower range of subjects. In the case of Caribbean universities, it would be useful to establish inter-university collaboration in research aimed at working together on issues where the pooled skills of scholars from different institutions will improve research efficiencies and yield more timely responses to Caribbean development challenges. Areas where particular institutions may, by their location and expertise, have comparative advantages in undertaking research in certain specialised areas

to support national and regional development should be identified and agreed for such inter-university collaboration.

In order to serve the regional research needs, Caribbean universities must recruit and retain a cadre of highly competent research scholars able to pursue research related to their respective disciplines and to provide guidance for graduate students, in particular, to undertake research which will develop a better understanding of national issues and their resolution. Caribbean universities would need to ensure that scholars are continually aware of the need for quality, relevant research outputs, and that they carry a teaching load which is not counterproductive to the necessary research. The two courses per semester or four courses per academic year which seems to be the norm in US research universities is worth adopting. The teaching load of more than three courses per semester that some scholars are required to carry in some Caribbean universities (Griffith, 2017), warrants further attention if these universities are to function in a research capacity to undertake the wide range of socially and developmentally relevant research to support Caribbean development.

In addition to research which responds to local development needs, scholars of Caribbean universities must pursue research that builds international reputational capital in the few specialised areas in which they have a comparative advantage. These include, but are not limited to, research pertaining to (i) investing in the blue economy for sustained growth and development, (ii) macroeconomic management and growth-enhancing reforms for small economies, (iii) building resilience in small states to natural disasters, including hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes and flooding and (iv) policy frameworks for attracting and utilising external investment in small states. This will enhance the competitiveness of Caribbean universities in those fields of knowledge generation. It will also provide a spin-off of economic returns from the services that they will be able to provide to the international community.

In discussing the goals, aspirations, and realities of research universities in developing countries, Altbach (2007) cautions that, given

their resource constraints, these universities need to have a realistic program of research based on a few areas of scholarship. This approach is evidenced in a number of universities in developing countries, including the National University of Taiwan which is committed to becoming a world class university for research in 20 to 30 world-class fields (Chang et al., 2015). While I would not recommend the deliberate narrowing of research to the detriment of addressing regional development needs, I share the view that beyond meeting the research needs for national and regional development, Caribbean universities should identify a limited number of special areas for research on which they can impact the global community and further enhance their international reputation.

Allied Responsibilities of Research Scholars

The role of regional university scholars must not only be to generate knowledge that is responsive to the development needs of the Caribbean, but also to disseminate that knowledge to optimise its use for the intended purpose. Research dissemination is an important activity that gives prominence to the research work of scholars. In order for their research work to be known and used, professionals, administrators, and policy makers need to be aware of the new knowledge and be motivated to act on it. The work of the researcher must therefore be extended to making new knowledge widely accessible to professionals, administrators, and policy makers. This means that they have to use available outlets to publicise and market their research outputs to those who should benefit from it.

Organizing and participating in local and regional conferences, seminars, and symposia should be an important aspect of the work of Caribbean scholars. In particular, these activities should target the professionals, administrators, and policy makers whose work and development activities would benefit from the research outputs. It would be useful as well to share the outcome of their research with fellow researchers in the national, regional and international community as well as the wider public. This would help to

raise the profile of the scholars as generators of knowledge and enhance the reputation of the regional universities as global authorities in the areas of research they pursue.

Based on the research work of these scholars, short courses and workshops could be organised to upgrade the knowledge and skills of practitioners in various sectors to support problem resolution, growth, and development in the respective areas. These short courses and workshops should be carefully structured as micro-credentials that may be stacked by those completing them for credits towards certification in more advanced programmes of the universities.

Scholars should periodically share the nature of the research work being undertaken, the progress made with specific research, and the findings of research through available print, electronic, and social media. They should use these opportunities, where appropriate, to show the relevance of their research to national and community issues with which the nation and Region are grappling.

Scholars should also seek to publish their research in scholarly, peer reviewed journals. This provides an opportunity for scholars to gain wider global recognition for the contribution being made to the generation of knowledge in their specialized field of research. These scholarly, peer reviewed publications would also inform and support conferences, seminars, symposia, short courses, and workshops, as well as public discourse based on the outcomes of their research. Such publications may also open avenues for consultancy services and grants as the work of the scholars becomes more widely known.

It is conceivable that scholars may find it challenging to gain access to certain reputable journals that cater to a readership that is less interested in research germane to Caribbean development. It is therefore suggested that more outlets for publications should be created in Caribbean universities for the work of its scholars. These would include scholarly journals that are well managed with firm and reliable timelines for publication and rigorous peer review that will contribute to the global recognition of these publications as authoritative sources of the best research on Caribbean development.

Final Reflections

Public universities in the Caribbean make a significant demand on the public purse, and policy makers in these countries will be understandably concerned about whether the country is receiving an adequate return on the investment made in these institutions. Caribbean countries should reasonably expect that scholars of their publicly funded or financially supported universities will make a substantial contribution to research that will help in addressing critical social and economic development issues with which the nation is grappling. The private sector is often uncertain about what benefits they may derive from the research undertaken by Caribbean scholars.

Caribbean scholars should regard it as a requirement of their profession to establish partnerships with various government departments and ministries that can benefit from their expertise and in particular their research. They should pursue a similar initiative with the private sector.

A radical shift is required to the limited working and research relationship that now exists between scholars and a few government departments, agencies and ministries, and a few private sector operations. The building of these relationships should be a mandatory part of the work of Caribbean scholars. Scholars should be aware of the issues with which these bodies are grappling that can be best addressed through their special expertise as researchers. It would be useful for university scholars in the Region to develop a joint research agenda with government departments, agencies, ministries and private sector operations as an important aspect of their job responsibilities.

Conclusion

I am suggesting that research that is socially and developmentally relevant to the needs of the Caribbean should be a critical responsibility of scholars in Caribbean universities. Knowledge generation that responds to the needs of the Region should be given priority research attention by all scholars of Caribbean universities. This requires a sustained focus on the development issues with which the Region's public and private sector are concerned and the establishment

of a close working relationship with them. It also requires a number of measures to share the research findings with professionals, administrators, policy makers, and the general public so that the benefits of the research are known and effectively used to support national and regional development.

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