

FUTURE EDUCATION OF THOUSANDS OF BARBADIANS IN JEOPARDY

The future tertiary education of thousands of Barbadians continues to be in severe jeopardy as a result of the DLP Government's continued broken promises to put in place adequate arrangements for the financing of their UWI student tuition fees.

The latest episode of this woeful saga is the failure by Education Minister, Ronald Jones, to ensure that his Ministry is in a position to process applications for the 3,000 bursaries which he, on the 11th of this month, stated would be launched in two weeks' time to help those financially challenged citizens who were already attending one of the three UWI campuses or who wished to enter for the first time. Minister Jones, on that occasion, revealed that the bursary arrangements had already been agreed to and that he was clearing up some of the "noise and mischief" circulating on the issue of paying tuition fees. However, both current and potential students of our three campuses continue to be clueless as to how they can even apply for a bursary. No application forms to so do presently exist and no criteria of how the process for the selection of recipients will be done has been established or announced.

Furthermore, no indication has been given as to who would be entitled to full bursaries, who would only be entitled to partial bursaries or how many of the declared 3,000 bursaries would be given in this coming academic year and to which faculty's students. We do not know whether students who are part time and who are employed will be eligible. We do not know whether persons with disabilities and others who make up the most vulnerable segment of our society would be given preference in so applying. We do not know whether potential students need to first apply for a loan before they can be eligible for a bursary. Most importantly, we do not know whether the selection process will be saddled with political considerations, with supporters of the governing party as well as relatives and friends of DLP politicians having a distinct advantage in accessing these bursaries.

I myself incognito contacted the Education Ministry last Friday and could obtain no response from any official on any of these queries. Has Minister Jones under public pressure, in yet another knee-jerk response made without any serious discussion with his Ministry's officers, proclaimed an initiative without the finances being in place to fund it?

Registration for the UWI school year will commence in three weeks' time. This political administration has created so much uncertainty over the funding by students of their tuition fees, whether on the issue of the student revolving loan funding, government granted bursaries and otherwise, that over 40 per cent of the present students are today uncertain about whether they will be able to continue their courses. They strongly believe that they are not in any position to access the finances to pay the onerous tuition costs which the DLP has now burdened them with. Additionally, there is presently a 50 per cent decline in new applications to enter UWI for the first time.

The Stuart/Jones and Sinclair led Cabinet, which presently owes the three UWI campuses a total debt of approximately \$221,000,000.00, is in serious danger of leaving a legacy of destruction of higher academic achievements to which our nationals have previously aspired. The misguided, ad hoc and uncertain education policy which this government has suddenly foisted on Barbados has the potential to take us back to our pre-independence era after our socio-economic advancement over the last half century.

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