

INAUGURAL ADDRESS
Professor Stephen Vasciannie
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First of all, allow me publicly to thank my family for lending me to the University of Technology. Dr Lisa, Sean and Dominic Vasciannie have lent me to other institutions before, but I want them to know that I do not take their support, forbearance and love for granted. Let me also thank other family members and friends for the guidance they have given me as I have embarked on this new venture. I see Dennis, my brother, Miss Dorcas White, Dr Dallas and several others, who have provided valuable insight. I also see Dr Ashley, whose latest advice is that I must not “pitch down” today.

Permit me also to thank the distinguished Chancellor, Minister of Education, Pro-Chancellor, and Council members for their decisions which have resulted in today’s installation.

I am also grateful to the members of staff at UTech – academic, administrative, technical and ancillary – who have welcomed me with kindness and grace. I also thank the students who have greeted me with warmth and courtesy. There is a new magazine called “Voices” published by the hard-working Corporate Communications Unit of the University – it is hot off the press. Well, in “Voices 1” 9 students were asked in a vox pop what they thought of the new president.

- A cool person and very funny, said one;
- He walks around the school and interacts with students, said a second;
- He may have some great ideas to develop the institution, said a third.

But three others did not know that there is a new President. Minister Reid, as they say at Jamaica College down the road, “work is burning in the fields”.

In my list of gratitude, I must also thank administrators, colleagues and friends at UWI for letting me go. So, too, my UWI students whom I left with sadness amidst the pleasures of multiple choice questions about the Sources of International Law, the technicalities of *Pianka v. Hylton* in the Law of the Sea, and the legal niceties of putative Jamaican babies born on foreign embassy premises.

Chancellor, I am honoured to be standing here this afternoon, grateful, excited and slightly overawed by the opportunities, and the accompanying challenges of taking this university forward. It would be difficult, if not impossible to avoid noting that we are in the Alfred Sangster Auditorium. Dr Sangster it is a privilege to have you here today. I regard your account of your stewardship, “The Making of a University: From CAST to the University of Technology” as required reading. Today I offer one quotation from that publication:

“The work at CAST and later at UTech, Jamaica was essentially one of building an institution which had an important early start, but which

seemed to have an uncertain future at the time. The Motto that came to be accepted by the community – Building a Future Together – came to symbolize the institution’s ethos and modus operandi.”

History is indeed a story of starts and starts.

But, if I may quote another predecessor, Dr the Hon. Rae Davis:

“Each of us stands on the shoulders of his predecessors. This advantage enables us to see further and reach higher...”

So, we set off on this leg of the journey from slightly higher ground, thanks to the contribution of all those who went before. And let me assure Dr Sangster, Dr Davies, and Professor Morrison, Ambassador Whiteman and Professor Gyles that the *modus operandi* will be to take the positive features of your respective tenures in order to build the future together.

Management literature tells us that “the first responsibility of a leader is to define reality”. The leader should do so not as an authoritarian seeking to impose his or her views upon others. Rather, the leader should aspire to help everyone in the organization to gain more insightful views of current reality.

What, then, is the current reality faced by the University of Technology, Jamaica? We need to identify this reality if we are to come together around a shared vision for the institution. Where are we now? Where should we seek to

go? And what are some of the constraints that limit the great potential that UTech has in serving Jamaican society and the wider Caribbean?

In the ten weeks that I have been here these are the questions that I have been exploring with colleagues and other members of the UTech community so that we can come together to work in unison for the good name, reputation and advancement of UTech, Jamaica.

Where are we now? Some of the answers are very clear. We can look at the balance sheet and see some of the assets and liabilities. Of course, some of the answers are not so clear. But permit me to look at the asset side and mention briefly some of the institutional wealth that I have inherited. These few examples are merely to indicate that UTech is still in quite robust health – in some respects.

The university stands on three pillars: Teaching, Research, and Service.

On the **teaching** side:

- We have a current enrolment of just under 13,000
- The institution CAST/UTech has turned out over 60,000 graduates since inception
- UTech graduates are still touted as industry-ready and highly regarded by potential employers. UTech is still the leading institution in the

English-speaking Caribbean for the training of health professionals in a number of areas, notably pharmacy; training for professionals in fields related to the built environment and land management (architects, land valuers, surveyors, realtors), and training of educators in technical education, to pick on just three areas.

- An estimated 75% of UTech's programmes are related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. And similarly, UTech through the School of Technical and Vocational Education remains engaged in the national dialogue on scientific and technical education.
- Just this month we launched an MSc degree in Sustainable Energy and Climate Change. The initiative is expected to provide leadership and training in the field for the entire region.

Our **research** activities are guided by the School of Graduate Studies Research and Entrepreneurship with a mandate to focus on inter-disciplinary and applied research relevant to the country's economic and social problems and needs.

In recent times some of the more notable research activities have included the following, for example:

- In Information and Communications Technology: we have seen the development of software to assist deaf students in language learning by Dr Paul Golding.

- A Modular LED Lighting System for street lighting – this development in LED technology yielded promising alternatives with several advantages: significantly longer life, better maintenance, and lower energy consumption. An application has already been made for patent protection.
- Investigation of Jamaica’s endemic plants in Cockpit Country Region. Our researcher, Dr Andrew Lamm is in search of new natural products with medicinal, agricultural and other commercial applications.
- UTech Ja is advanced in marijuana research. The University has been collaborating with local and international partners in this regard with the view of supporting the development of a medicinal cannabis industry in Jamaica.

Teaching, research and service. As to **service**, the University remains committed to the idea that our students, academics and administrators must contribute to the development of Jamaican and Caribbean society. We must do this because social outreach improves us as individuals, and reminds us that no person is an island.

But, in addition, we must undertake social outreach efforts because we recognize that society is investing in us. UTech students are generally beneficiaries of tax dollars paid by Jamaican residents – so, even in the face of well-known economic challenges, our students must be encouraged to give back to society.

This is not merely theoretical. The University, through its Community Service Programme – known as CSP 1001 – has reached out over the years to various Jamaica entities and has made a significant difference in the lives of persons in need. This is a contribution of which UTech should be very proud. It is part of our institutional DNA, and helps to define the social wealth our organization.

On the question of social outreach, allow me to offer one further point. In several respects, Jamaica throws up more than its fair share of challenges: we are, in short, a tough society. Many of us cower in fear because of the violence which abounds. There is, too, in some instances, a coarseness in public discourse. And, we now have occasion to note that the roughness in society has spread. Rural Jamaicans in the past would sometimes think twice about visiting certain violence-plagued parts of Kingston. Now, however, the roughness also defines some other parishes.

And, more generally, many of us regret the disappearance of trust, civility, cooperation and respect in areas of national life.

In this context, denizens of the University – you and I – must be reminded that we have a duty to be exemplars of proper values and attitudes. We must accept the concept of *noblesse oblige*: when someone has been given much, much is required in return (to borrow from St. Luke's Gospel). In response, I expect that some students will want to challenge the premise that much has been given to them. True, the students' lot is not an easy one, but we should

acknowledge that you are being encouraged along a path of achievement that will enable you to contribute substantially to your livelihood and your society. We should not scoff at this benefit, and I do not believe you do.

Since my arrival at the University of Technology, several persons, both within and without the institution have asked me about my vision for UTech.

I understand the nuances and implications in that question. It is not just about 'current reality', the things we can see with the naked eye. There are inner-eye questions as well: matters of perception, and questions about hopes, aspirations, imagination and judgement.

So, it is important to note that, as an institution, UTech may be doing reasonably well in some respects. But this is not enough. Persons also want to know whether there is a path towards progress or further progress; and they want to know, in short order, what are the plans to address significant areas of weakness, many of which have made it to the opinion pages of our national newspapers and into our energetic talk show circuit.

Over the past ten weeks or so, I have sought to listen to various groups within the UTech community. But, in the midst of my listening, I have sought to be guided by certain fundamental elements which help to define my vision for the

institution. These fundamental elements, some of which have been very kindly recorded in the **Sunday Observer** newspaper include the following:

(1) UTech must ensure that it provides a student-friendly environment. Our students must know that we are working to ensure that they fulfill their intellectual potential in keeping with international standards of treatment, teaching and learning. This emphasis on the place of the student must be based on the fact that students are not an afterthought to the work of UTech – they constitute the *raison d’etre* of the institution. They are our primary reason for being here.

As part of the drive to promote student interests and learning, we should, for instance, introduce a competitive scholarship examination on a Faculty by Faculty basis. This should be the highest merit-based award from the University.

Likewise, in keeping with a student-centred approach we must apply our rules with a sympathetic, balanced and even-handed spirit. Perceptions of different treatment without justification will invariably cause grievance. By the same token, in matters such as the administration of discipline, and in the treatment of applications in various areas of University life, we must aspire towards the highest standards of customer service. If we do not treat our students with

kindness, professionalism and courtesy, we should not be surprised when, having graduated, they opt to disregard us.

(2) In placing students at the centre of our academic universe, we should also be mindful of practical challenges faced by students. If you have a scholarship – for instance, for sports – you should receive the benefits of the scholarship on time. If you wish to use “Wi-Fi” from your Hall of Residence, you should be able to do so without hassle. There may be good reasons to explain some of the challenges currently faced by students. But we must all work to overcome and banish these reasons. Similarly, if we are truly student-centred, we must constantly assess our programmes and our standards in order to ensure that we continue to expose our students to the realities and requirements of the 21st century global marketplace.

(3) Universities live and die on the basis of the creation and dissemination of knowledge. UTech lecturers must always place themselves in a position to undertake independent research and keep up with the latest developments in their respective fields. I accept the responsibility to drive and promote a renewed research thrust, keeping in our sights the fact that research is competitive and global. With this in mind, there are a number of initiatives that I will encourage UTech to implement.

In the first place, we should introduce a peer-reviewed journal published three or four times per year featuring the work of UTech lecturers. Secondly, we should introduce financial incentives for persons who publish articles in peer-reviewed journals or scholarly books. Thirdly, UTech should establish a University Press in order to increase the avenues for scholarly publications for academics in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean. Fourthly – and this is perhaps the general point – we should engender a culture of publishing according to which promotion within the academic ranks is largely dependent on scholarly work.

(4) My commitment is to our having an inclusive and transparent institution. I believe that UTech must strive to be an inclusive institution where attention is paid to the views of the different stakeholders. Of course, in the end some views will prevail over others on a particular issue, but every stakeholder must feel that she or he has had a fair hearing. To date, quite a few persons have felt at liberty to stop me on the campus with issues, and Mr. McGregor, the Student Union President, has been commendably frank and straightforward in his representation of student interests. When we combine transparency with integrity and judgment, our time spent on infighting will be greatly reduced.

(5) UTech must seek to promote cooperative and competitive relationships within the Jamaican academic community. We must be cooperative because

we are all working for the benefit of our students, and our wider communities. Here I take the opportunity to welcome some of my much respected colleagues from the University of the West Indies and some of my former students from UWI and the Norman Manley Law School.

Generally, too, we should realize that competition in some areas will only help to enhance the quality of our lecturers, students, administrators and other staff members. If I know that students may choose one university or another, it will be in my interest to perform at the highest level in order to be attractive to students. Moreover, as university choice widens, this serves to increase the enrolment level of Jamaican and Caribbean nationals in tertiary studies. This commitment to increased enrolment is a commitment to higher intellectual standards throughout the country and the region.

As part of our effort to cultivate a cooperative and competitive tertiary level environment, we should, of course, discourage tribalism among our universities. Friendly rivalry is good – and I note, in passing, that UTech is the home of champions – but it must never become hostility.

(6) Another important vision question concerns points of emphasis in UTech's work. Some people say that UTech must focus exclusively on technology and scientific matters, and leave other, non-scientific, subjects to other places.

There are two issues here: first, what should be our focus? And second, should our focus on some subjects lead to the exclusion of all others?

In response to the first, it is beyond argument that the University of Technology should concentrate on technology issues, as its name suggests.

But, just as importantly, our focus on technology and scientific matters need not prompt us to ignore other issues. Some of UTech's offerings, for example in business-related studies, are of a high quality and have been in place for years. They proceed on the basis that scientific and technological developments need to take place within a commercial context. They also proceed on the basis that business and commercial activities are of profound significance to Caribbean societies.

UTech should, therefore, continue to offer its offerings in areas not regarded as technologically driven. At an earlier time -- when we cast our bread upon the waters, for it to come back after many days -- the College of Arts, Science and Technology firmly defended its jurisdiction in the Arts. And, similarly, the constituent instruments of the University of Technology retain the idea that areas of study within the humanities fall properly within the scope of the institution. At a time when the intellectual community is opening up avenues of enrolment for an increasing number of students, the case for UTech to

continue its teaching in business, the humanities, the law, and other non-scientific areas is firmly made.

And the point may be taken further. UTech should not work on the assumption that there is a body of learning in science and technology that may be kept distinct always and everywhere from the body of learning identified as the humanities. Rather, we should cultivate the view that the scientist must have some degree of appreciation for the Arts, and *vice versa*. By allowing the interplay between different areas of study – even while placing emphasis on Science and Technology – UTech will help to promote well-rounded graduates ready to excel in their chosen areas of specialization, but exposed to other fields of learning.

More than 50 years ago, the British scientist cum government official and novelist C.P. Snow reflected on *The Two Cultures* – the arts and the sciences -- in a celebrated lecture at Cambridge University. Snow bemoaned the tendency to assume that persons should not be exposed to different areas of learning. He stated his thesis as follows:

“A good many times I have been present at gatherings of people who, by the standards of the traditional culture, are thought highly educated and who have with considerable gusto been expressing their incredulity at the illiteracy of scientists. Once or twice I have been provoked and have asked the company how many of them could describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The

response was cold: it was also negative. Yet I was asking something which is the scientific equivalent of: *Have you read a work of Shakespeare's?*

I now believe that if I had asked an even simpler question — such as, What do you mean by mass, or acceleration, which is the scientific equivalent of saying, *Can you read?* — not more than one in ten of the highly educated would have felt that I was speaking the same language. So the great edifice of modern physics goes up, and the majority of the cleverest people in the western world have about as much insight into it as their neolithic ancestors would have had.”

So, on the question of emphasis, yes, UTech must focus on the technology sphere, but we should not behave as if other areas of learning are unimportant. Nor should we cut back on opportunities for the pursuit of other areas of learning that we have already established.

(7) Finally, I wish to make what may be a controversial point about UTech and the issue of self-perception. At an introductory meeting with staff, and in a Town Hall meeting with students, one question, the same question, was posed by two different persons. The question was: “Why have you come here?” Tone is important. The tone of the question was not: “Look, Vasciannie, we know you are a buttoo, wha you come yah fah?” Instead it was more gentle and probing, as in “Look, Vasciannie, we know you have done a thing or two in academia and diplomacy, why would you want to come here?”

In response, I said that I have come because I believe I can make a difference at the institution. But, at its heart, this question may tell us something about UTech, and about where our shared vision should take us. UTech must perceive itself as equal to the great universities of the world, and must work towards the fulfillment of this perception. So, in closing

- If we work hard at making UTech more student-friendly,
- If we join the effort to enhance publications,
- If we commit ourselves more seriously to scholarship,
- If we are more committed to high quality research,
- If we provide opportunities for our students to flourish in an atmosphere of equality and fairness,
- And if we reduce the level of internal disagreement as we seek to expand our intellectual horizons;

If we do all these things, then UTech people will not ask “why did you come here?” No, they will say, “We know why you came here”.

So, we must redouble our effort to stand on the shoulders of others, and we must aspire to greatness as an institution. Can we do it? Yes, we can!

Thank you.