

COMMENTARY *By* Dr. DHANPAUL NARINE

Professor Ivelaw Griffith, UG Renaissance Vice-Chancellor



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It is no secret that the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana (UG) took over an institution that badly needed help. The University of Guyana was founded in 1963 and its funding depended mainly on subventions from the central government. Money has always been in short supply; the tuition fees and goodwill have not been able to balance the books.

Since its founding, UG has had its fair share of political interference from various governments. What is clear is that the political establishment, for its own reasons, allowed the university to deteriorate. The politicians blame each other but the proof is there. A fact-finding visit to UG in 2016 found the place in a state of disarray.

There were some buildings that needed repairs while a number of classrooms were without chairs. The once cherished library where this writer spent many hours had stuff lying in corners. The technology department had rusty equipment wasting away for years, the law faculty needed windows, and yes, the toilets didn't work. Students complained about the lack of recreational facilities and security on campus and their teacher's inability or unwillingness to turn in grades on time, among other things.

The visit also found that many staff members had good intentions, worked hard and were committed to the students. But as in any institution, morale could be better. There were those that were pessimistic about the chances of UG and cited political interference, poor wages and working conditions. Given this state of affairs UG needed help, it needed leadership. It needed someone to make the turnaround happen. In short, UG needed change.

The appointment of Professor Ivelaw Griffith

as the Tenth Vice-Chancellor of UG heralded a new chapter in the administration of the university. Professor Griffith brought a number of positives to the job. He is a product of UG, has taught in foreign universities and ran a number of them that required big budgets and transparency. He was Provost of York College in the CUNY system; York lies in the heart of the immigrant community and has seen a rise in student gain and graduation rates during Professor Griffith's tenure there.

There is no doubt that since he became Vice Chancellor the profile of UG has risen significantly. The School of Medicine regained its accreditation, work has begun on a new student complex, the Walter Rodney Chair was restored, a Distinguished Artist-in-Residence was appointed, a Distinguished Lecture Series was established to honor the intellectual giants of UG, the anniversary of former President Cheddi Jagan was observed, Wi-fi was made available on campus, the Turkey-en and Tain talks have discussed a number of relevant issues, including race, reality and reconciliation in Guyana, and the impact of oil and gas in the country.

A progressive university expands and embraces the future with confidence. Under the leadership of the Vice-Chancellor there are a number of new programs in social work, food science, psychology, nursing, civil engineering, and in oil and gas. There is a Master of Science degree in Petroleum Engineering and an Associate in Science degree in conjunction with the University of the West Indies. These are just a few of the innovative programs that the university has im-

it. According to Professor Griffith, 'the university should not be seen as a glorified high school. We need to go beyond a place where you can simply do teaching, but you can also do research. We need to go beyond the idea of what we can get but what we can give as well. We want a university that puts students at the center.' The Vice Chancellor has consistently argued that there should be an emphasis on quality.

How can there be quality, accountability

trying to impose American values at UG but he says that there is nothing wrong with increasing standards and getting rid of mediocrity. He says that the diaspora has been playing a significant role in helping UG and he is grateful. The Vice-Chancellor has set up support groups in a number of countries to enhance the profile of UG and it has taken much time and energy. These Education Resource Ambassadors (ERA's) are drawn from the rank and file of the community and the mission is to support the



The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Guyana, Professor Ivelaw Griffith speaks at City Hall in New York. He urges support for UG and wants it to be a world class institution.

plemented. A detailed description can be found on the UG website.

The Vice-Chancellor launched his 'UG Renaissance' campaign in 2016. His vision is to rebrand the university, to work with the public and private sectors, and alums, to bring UG into the fold of world-class universities. But he argues that for this to happen we cannot be comfortable with mediocrity. It cannot be business as usual. In 2020, the economic and sociological landscape of Guyana will be changed and the university must be able to be a part of that change and to help direct

and responsibility when the fundamentals are neglected? For example, what is the excuse for teachers not turning their grades in on time? When this happens it is the students that suffer and it undermines the reputation and standard of the university. Despite the challenges, Professor Griffith has taken steps to address areas of neglect. He argues that the air-conditioning of the George Walcott Lecture Theater, getting wild animals off the campus, or paving the road, are basic things but they needed to be done.

There is the view that Professor Griffith is

rebuilding of the university.

In New York, the Alumni and Friends of the University of Guyana (AFOUG) has held a number of events that have involved the wider community to lift the profile of UG. Professor Griffith speaks glowingly about the re-accreditation of the School of Medicine that he calls 'a signal point of pride.' Another proud achievement is the International Diaspora Conference that was organized by UG and the publication of a book 'The Dynamics of Caribbean Diaspora Engagement' to commemorate that event. A

second Diaspora Conference is scheduled for July 2019.

Professor Griffith is optimistic about the future of UG. The new Jay and Sylvia Sobraj Center for Behavioral Science and Research together with new degree programs and improvements in the physical facilities will add to the reputation of the institution. There must be talks with the faculty and unions about salaries and working conditions but they need to be consistent with overall mission of the university, of educating students for national development.

Professor Griffith took over a university that was in crisis. Many will argue that UG still needs the efforts of a Hercules to pull it to the top. What is clear, is that to

date, Professor Griffith and his team has risen to the challenges. After three years, the report card of the Vice-Chancellor shows consistent achievement. It shows a leader that believes in transparency and inclusion. He should be allowed to continue the reforms that are needed to make UG a world-class learning and research institution.

(Dhanpaul Narine is a graduate of the University of Guyana. He writes for 'The West Indian' in New York).

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of THE WEST INDIAN.