

OPINION & INSIGHTS

UWP free education at SALCC proposal: Questions to be answered

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph

Questions for the UWP

Albeit the free education being proposed here is not for 'university' education, as advanced by Hon Allen Chastanet, as the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College (SALCC) is not a University, but should still be welcomed while being assessed, scrutinised and critiqued, alongside the One University Per Household Initiative undertaken by the Saint Lucia Labour Party Government. The latter will be the basis of another article, which will also ask some pertinent questions through a public policy perspective.

Notwithstanding the welcoming of the policy position by many including myself, it is important to not be overly satisfied as an active citizen with the articulation of grand policy proposals from political parties, without subjecting them to scrutiny through ideological, public policy and political history considerations. Furthermore, it is important to ensure that the policy is well-thought out, comprehensive, research-driven and has the requisite nuts and bolts required for smooth implementation.

As such, with both political parties utilising the opportunity to articulate their education plans and philosophies, it provides public scholars and the public the opportunity to scrutinise and interrogate them. Notwithstanding the importance of vision in politics, the 'what', 'how', 'when', and 'why' are also important. The latter should never be the scapegoat for the former.

After all, I will be doing that which I have asked for in previous articles where I advocated for the inclusion of the political debate among leaders, where these public policy questions can be asked and answered, in light of the constant friendly media, partisan rambblings in Parliament and other mediums which favour politicians.

Every policy should not just be swallowed because it has come from a political party that one supports but must still be interrogated to ensure that it is realising the outcomes it intended, comes from a place of sincerity, and does not give politicians a free pass by making broad visionary statements without providing the qualifying details necessary to permit proper public policy implementation and analysis.

But the surprise some have expressed at the recent policy announcement of the United Workers Party (UWP) is borne out of various factors, such as (i) the ideological 'inconsistencies' or 'growth', as evidenced in the glaring absence of this policy in any form during their last two manifestos under the same leadership, and (ii) the political history surrounding the college and the UWP during their last term.

Under the latter, under the first term of the former prime minister Allen Chastanet, he is on record suggesting that by now i.e., 2018, the college should have already been self-sufficient as he rejected a proposal for the increase of tuitions citing quality concerns which did not justify the increase being sought. Further, he noted that the government has been generous giving the college that level of allocation over the years.

Dean Nestor reported then that in effect Chastanet was arguing that "Government simply would be adding more money to a very flawed system which won't resolve those issues and that a progressive weaning-off of the Government's teets by SALCC could prove beneficial to the school and its students,

providing better overall education at a more reasonable price."

Recognising the aforementioned statements by Chastanet during his first term, it is important to thus ask of him, in light of his new policy pronouncement, whether the college has undergone any significant quality improvements from 2018-2025, which would justify his provision of more resources to the college through the provision of free education, which would be paid to the school? Or is it that he is willing to pump more money into the 'broken system', or is the system fixed?

1. If the answer to the aforementioned is no, how does Chastanet reconcile his previous polar opposite view of SALCC being a drain on the public purse through the constant subventions provided by the government with his new commitment to providing more money to 'be a further drain on the public purse' without the qualitative changes at the College? What concrete evidence or changed circumstances now lead him to believe the government can afford a free tertiary education policy?
2. How does Chastanet believe the introduction of free education will enable the college to be self-sufficient, which he held to be a prerequisite for further investment in the college?
3. How can the college be self-sufficient without the necessary capital injection by the government to assist in reducing recurrent expenditure, for example, through renewable energy to reduce electricity costs, or by providing other forms of training and development to the wider public and international organisations for payment of fees?
4. Or should it be that the one tertiary level institution in the country should not be 'self-sufficient' but should be treated like a public good such as health care, infrastructure, etc., as suggested by Dr. Ernest Hilaire in 2018?
5. Will the government new absorption of the cost of \$9 000 per child, according to Chastanet, for every child see a cap in the amount of students SALCC can take through government assistance, or will there be an additional investment to assist in the increased intake?
6. What will be the entry requirements? Will they remain the same?
7. In circumstances where there will be no cap in the amount of students SALCC can take, can the government afford the \$9 000 per child to ensure the implementation of their free education policy?
8. Moreover, Chastanet argued in the past that the college was possibly accommodating too many people. As such, will he reduce the number of intakes by the college while still pursuing a policy of free education?
9. Further, he noted that the programmes at the SALCC should possibly not all be at a flat rate of \$1500 per student regardless of the content as some may be priced more. This would of course hinder the ability of ordinary St. Lucians to afford it as also noted by Dr. Hilaire.
10. As such, is there going to be a re-costing of the programmes with the government now absorbing the 'true' costs or will the government only pay for programmes that are truly costed at \$1 500?
11. What the former prime minister also

hinted at is the inherent problems with subsidising one tertiary level educational institution, i.e., SALCC, without subsidising the others. So, in this new iteration does the former prime minister now believe in increasing the allocation for the college as evidenced through the free education policy, or will it include other post-secondary institutions?

12. Also, have these quality concerns (whatever they also are) been addressed sufficiently in Chastanet's eyes, that would make his free education policy workable and necessary?
13. How will the funding for this "free education for all" policy be sustained without cutting other essential public services, increasing taxes, or accruing debt? Can you provide a detailed financing plan?
14. Will "free" mean zero fees and zero ancillary costs (books, accommodation, transport)? If not, how is "free" being defined in your new policy so that students are not burdened with hidden costs?
15. When you previously argued that free tertiary education could lead to overburdening the system and lowering standards, what measures are you now implementing to ensure that in expanding access, you maintain academic quality and institutional capacity?
16. How will you ensure that graduates from a free-tertiary policy are employable and not left with qualifications that do not meet market needs according to your own previous dispositions, especially given your party's past focus on market alignment and competitiveness?
17. Can you name jurisdictions (in the Caribbean or elsewhere) you studied in preparing this new policy, where free tertiary education has been successfully implemented without negative side effects, and how their models inform your plan?
18. Chastanet admits rightfully that Saint Lucia requires additional tertiary level graduates to catapult economic development similar to Barbados and Guyana are among other countries. But, this level is not the same as what is being proposed here. As such, how do we ensure that Saint Lucia can increase our tertiary graduates, beyond SALCC? What would be the plan for university education as SALCC is not a university?
19. Further, Chastanet noted in a recent interview with Lisa Joseph, that previously the college needed to reduce their 42 programme offerings to enhance efficiency and quality as opposed to requesting the increase in subvention. Does this position still hold, and if so, where are these superfluous programmes that are present at the college that Chastanet believes need to be trimmed?
20. What does Chastanet believe should be done with the students desirous of pursuing these programmes, and what will occur to the teachers who are qualified in these programmes which will become redundant?
21. Chastanet also questioned then as he does now, whether the college is making a meaningful contribution to the economic development of this country, and whether the pedagogy is linked to the economic realities of the country? As

such, what must be asked of Chastanet is what are these 'economic realities' that he speaks of, beyond Nursing and how does he envisage the college's role in this contribution to the economy of Saint Lucia?

22. Have young people been consulted on this new 'economic reality' that is going to determine their training areas and jobs, or are they passive recipients in this process? In circumstances where young people also want to retain traditional jobs, will the College still facilitate it? Put another way, if I want to work in tourism will I be omitted from this new policy?
23. But, with this new diet that Chastanet proposes, how does he plan to train individuals rapidly to teach and instruct in these new areas?
24. Have we undergone any national assessment and studies which give us any basis for determining what the future of the economic development looks like for Saint Lucia, in order to streamline the curriculum for the jobs of the future, while still being conscious of our recurrent issues within Saint Lucia that require jobs still?
25. Chastanet also notes that the college needs to enhance the TVET menu. It would be important for him to identify what are the additional items required on this menu. But recognising the creation of the TVET institutes in Saint Lucia, would it not be more efficient and cheaper to increase the offerings at these institutes for SALCC students as opposed to increasing the TVET offerings at the college?
26. How will he ensure that the increase in TVET offerings does not dramatically displace the 'academia' component of the college?
27. Chastanet also notes continually that the programs lack quality, and such needs to be improved with the reduction in the number of programmes. It would be interesting to know what are some of these quality concerns that he believes are present?

These questions are important to ask of Chastanet and the UWP, recognising that when politicians take 360-degree positions, the public must ask 'why the change?' The public must also ask 'what' does this change look like, while interrogating the nuts and bolts of the changing position.

It is akin to Kamala Harris's shifting positions on major issues from her presidential run to becoming vice president to also running for president of the United States of America which caused many pundits to ask of her, 'who she was'.

It is not to suggest that politicians cannot shift their policy positions, based on evidence, experiences, among other considerations. But, when this occurs, the public must be provided with appropriate explanations which will assist in trust and confidence in the political official.

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