

Address of Hon L.D.Dookun-Luchoomun
Minister of Education and Human Resources,
Tertiary Education and Scientific Research
42nd Meeting of the UOM Court
Monday July 30, 2018

Protocol

Congratulations to the University of Mauritius for holding the 42nd Meeting of its Court, thus safeguarding a tradition of bringing together people who share a common interest in the University's work and life. Indeed, what brings us all together is the fact that we have at heart the well-being of the University.

Such meetings have always led to some lively debates on certain issues, thereby adding to the vibrancy that should characterize a University.

Dear Members,

Those of us who have remained close to the workings of the University of Mauritius are aware of the huge strides it has taken so as to position itself in the forefront. Much of the credit has to go to the Chancellor and Pro-Chancellor, Vice Chancellor as well as the Council Members, Management, Personnel and a host of others across the rank and file. They have spared no efforts in helping the University in reinforcing its position as the premier Public Higher Education Institution.

Bravo to all for that.

This University has indeed been blazing new trails so as to respond to the present and on-coming needs. I am particularly pleased with the efforts being invested in research to increase the intellectual capital of

the country, with the setting up of the University Industry Liaison Office and the Knowledge Transfer Office, among others. These serve to prove that the University knows exactly where it is going and how to get there.

There are certain areas however where the University will now have to play a more forceful and pronounced role.

Take the issue of student mobility, for instance.

Many of our students who had traditionally been seeking international degrees from Universities overseas, are now turning to local Higher Education providers.

However, it is also true that, given the internationalization of higher education, there is today a boom in global student mobility.

A British Council report entitled “*10 trends: Transformative changes in higher education*” and that came out in July last year, indicates that five of the top ten fastest-growing 18-to-22-year-old populations through to 2025 will be in Africa. Africa’s youth population is even expected to surpass that of Asia somewhere around 2080.

And that youthful population is actively seeking new learning opportunities.

Hence, it becomes important for Mauritius to become a center of attraction for the youth of Africa and also those in the Indian Ocean. For Africa, this becomes all the more significant given that the Continent has made of its Renaissance a new mantra.

This is why my Ministry will always respond positively to and give its blessings to the determination of our top notch institutions, like the UoM, to forge ahead with the internationalization process. It takes top institutions to attract top-quality students and researchers.

Of course, some progress has been noted in that direction where the University’s intake of foreign students is concerned. But we need to

work hand in hand and harder to project our small country on the regional arena, in as far as higher education is concerned.

You would wish to know that we are operationalizing a “**Higher Education Desk**” at my Ministry to showcase the Mauritian Higher Education landscape. The Desk will, amongst others, act as a focal point to disseminate information, market our TEI’S and provide advice to both local and international students on higher education opportunities in Mauritius, including student welfare, accommodation, cost of living, student fees, visa procedures, medical treatment and other relevant information. On the other hand, we are equally considering using our Embassies and High Commissions to promote international students’ enrolment from the Continent.

Members of the Court,

There are some important aspects I would really wish to draw your attention to in the context of the internationalization effort.

One is the need to attach due importance to the **quality of the Student experience** I need hardly insist on the necessity for our Universities to create the conditions and ethos that would guarantee highly profitable and enriching learning experiences for their students. This is particularly true for students who would have left their close kith and kin overseas to venture into an unknown territory that a hosting country represents. A recent article in the local press did highlight that most foreign students are, in the main, quite happy with what our local universities offer them in terms of campus environment and student support. I think we should continually be seeking their feedback and bring redress wherever necessary.

The second aspect about internationalization and that is closely linked to the quality of student experience is the issue of **accommodation**.

I know that the UoM has been keen on setting up a Hall of Residence as an additional incentive, especially for the overseas students. Well, in line with our rationalization principles, I am pleased to share with you that my Ministry is envisaging the setting up of Halls of Residence in a strategic area that would serve to house students from different Public Universities. This is still under discussion with the Board of Investment. But I do believe that this would also help the various TEI's focus on their core functions while enhancing their ability to attract more foreign students

I would strongly advise the UoM to rally around this idea.

All our Universities, and that goes for the UoM as well, would stand to gain from this collaborative effort. – I make a special appeal to all TEI's to team up with the Ministry so as to open wider the doors to students from the region and the Continent.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Court members have to be seen as friends ready to proffer advice and suggestions in the larger interest of the institution. However, this does not preclude us from being critical friends.

So the suggestions and policy orientations I will now be putting forward have to be seen from that light.

Mauritius is too small a country to acquiesce to or again justify any diffusion of resources. Rationalization has to be the norm and we have to also think seriously about the number of courses that are being offered—often also duplicated—in our HE institutions. These necessitate a tapping of already scarce resources.

You, at the UoM, I know, have taken the right step in this direction. The transformation of the UoM library into an e-library is a typical positive action taken by you. I am happy that we have injected an additional Rs 3 million such that the e-library can now serve all public HEIs.

I am certain, that, soon, we should be in a position to identify yet other areas of inter-institutional collaboration in line with the rationalization policy.

Thus, is it not time for the UoM to concentrate more on post-graduate programs with UTM AND UDM becoming feeder institutions for higher levels of study.

On the other hand, we have, at some point in time, to seriously contemplate maximizing the use of our human resources. I believe the time is ripe for the elaboration of a policy and operational carve out to press upon institutions to engage in the sharing of resources—material, physical and----- human.

Let collaboration and not competition be our credo.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Don't get me wrong. As a critical friend, my primary purpose is to safeguard and sustain the reputation and values of the University. It's not a pitched battle I am engaging in, a kind of "Us" v/s "Them" narrative.

We should not see one another as being on the opposing side of the barricades. In fact, in our world of learning, it is hardly proper for us to have barricades at all—let's leave that to those who relish the construction of walls rather than bridges.

Being in the news, being visible is a good thing—even an excellent one. But we have to be in the news for all the right reasons and not the wrong ones. I recall having drawn the attention of the Court to this in July 2016. I pointed out then, and I quote, "Contestation and debate are laudable but the public square is never the best place for these to take place." Unquote.

Lately, and this is unfortunate, this is precisely what's been happening.

The University Management gets to be animated by the best of intentions and seeks to work in the larger interests of the Institution and we should see to it that new fault lines are not created. The late proclamation of results or the choice of venue for the graduation ceremonies, for example, sadly caused serious ripples on the campus.

We all know that, by virtue of the smallness of the traditional venue for such Ceremonies, these tend to extend over a period of 2 weeks, if not more. I am informed that the Council appointed a Special Committee comprising various stakeholders including representatives

of the students to brainstorm on the choice of an appropriate venue. I am given to understand that work is in progress and a decision is expected soon.

We could have done without the hoopla around the issue.

Without being press-averse, I do believe that institutions should be allowed to function smoothly and not be subject to unnecessary and uncalled-for jolts, stirrings and turmoil.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Being part of the decision-making body of a University – or anywhere else for that matter-- carries with it a sense of collective responsibility. This cardinal principle of good governance and accountability should be uppermost in our dealings.

Our leading public University would stand to gain through a positive and forward looking attitude and stance in such matters.

Allow me to make a further suggestion of a different order.

I was referring earlier to the issue of internationalization of the HE sector. Experience has indicated to us that, all in all, students in 30 countries in Africa meet the Mauritian entry requirements for university studies. However, of these, students from only 15 countries secure their results in time to apply during our Universities' application window. The rest have to wait for some 7 to 8 months before they can do so—with results that we can all guess.

And, this also explains why we fail to fill the offered by Mauritius under the Mauritius - Africa Scholarship Scheme.

I therefore wonder if the UoM should not envisage a **second round of enrolment** within one academic year—very much like other local institutions are doing.

I would also like to inform you my Ministry is envisaging the promulgation of the Higher Education Act and the setting up of the independent Quality Assurance Authority in the coming months. This will further bolster the qualitative dimension of the Higher Education provision.

We are planning to have a deeper reflection on issues like Rationalization, Harmonization, Funding and Internationalization. These could be thematic areas that would come under scrutiny during “*les Assises de l’enseignement supérieur*” that we are envisaging to hold.

We hope to have your full and active contributions at that time.

Let me end on that note.

Thank you, Chancellor, for having given me the floor.