

PNQ ON EDUCATION

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

UTM – RECRUITMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE (09/05/17)

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr X. L. Duval) (*by Private Notice*) asked the Minister of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research whether, in regard to the University of Technology Mauritius, she will state if she has taken cognizance of the –

- (a) dismal academic performance thereat;
- (b) deteriorating morale of the teaching and non-teaching staff thereof;
- (c) deteriorating state of infrastructure and equipment thereof;
- (d) urgent need to improve the management thereof, and
- (e) University's request for an increase in the student fees and, if

so, indicate the actions taken by her Ministry in relation thereto, if any.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, with your permission, I will answer to PQ B/389 along with the PNQ, as they relate to the same issue.

Madam Speaker, the UTM is a public university set up in year 2000 by an Act of Parliament. UTM recruits students as per entry requirements as approved by the Academic Council and its Board. UTM has revised its programmes and reviewed the courses which now also include work placements.

It currently offers courses at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The University currently offers around 60 courses, 40 courses at undergraduate level and 20 at post-graduate level. Over the last 3 years, the University has consistently produced over 1000 graduates yearly.

Moreover, the UTM has set up its School of Health Sciences in October 2015 and since December 2016, the University is on the list of recognised medical institutions of the Medical Council of Mauritius.

With regard to part (a) of the question, I wish to inform the House that, in 2016, UTM obtained the Africa Education Leadership Award that further reflects the quality of Higher Education dispensed by the University.

Moreover, from 2015 to date, UTM has consistently obtained a third of the MPhil/ PhD scholarships awarded by the Tertiary Education Commission (6 out of 19), indicating the quality of the programme of studies at the University.

All the above indicate that it is unfair and inaccurate to say that the academic performance at UTM is dismal.

However, that being said, the academic quality is a core concern for any tertiary education institution and the aim is to constantly improve on quality. The UTM has a Quality Assurance Unit which was set up in 2005. The University also undergoes cyclic Quality Audit, commissioned by the Tertiary Education Commission and carried out by international practitioners. UTM is to submit an evaluation report on the level of its quality in August 2017 and its next External Quality Audit will be carried out by the Tertiary Education Commission in November 2017.

Also, the Tertiary Education Commission is creating capacity building exercises in all tertiary education institutions through workshops and seminars on quality assurance in higher education institutions. Moreover, a VC and Director General Committee has been set up to discuss national higher educational issues and to ensure systematic implementation of policies and processes.

The Government is also promoting research in higher education institutions and UTM is also being encouraged to improve its research capabilities.

The new Tertiary Education Commission Director is also personally sitting on the Academic Council meetings to ensure that quality of programmes are being adhered to.

Madam Speaker, with regard to part (b) of the question, the UTM has a staff of 152 persons, and the fact that the University has obtained the Africa Education Leadership award is reflective of the state of affairs and quality delivery at the University.

Madam Speaker, let us be honest with ourselves. In any large organisation, there are bound to be some staffing issues. This applies as well to the UTM, and the House can rest assured that the University management is looking into these on a case-to case basis, and in a spirit of dialogue with all parties concerned.

One of the issues raised relates to the shortage of staff. It is, in this context, important to note that the UTM management has already initiated actions to fill in vacant positions on a priority basis. As for senior staffing positions such as Human Resource Management Officers, Health and Safety Officers and the Head of School of the Health Sciences, these have already been filled. Action is also being taken by the UTM for the filling of 45 other posts at the level of the University. In light of the above, claiming that there is a deterioration of the morale at the institution would be extreme and unfair.

Madam Speaker, with regard to part (c) of the PNQ, I am informed that, at the origin, the University of Technology Mauritius, in the year 2000, consisted of essentially 2 buildings, that is, the ex-MIPAM and the ex-SITRAC buildings. These are Ground+1 and Ground+2 buildings respectively, situated adjacent to one another.

These buildings had initially been built as training centres, with classrooms only and had as such not been designed to serve as university infrastructure. In 2007, a Ground+1 Plaza was constructed as complement to these buildings to enable students to have a proper working environment.

Other infrastructural improvement and maintenance works carried out this year were waterproofing works on the building, housing the central administration and the School of Innovative Technologies, painting works, in addition to the setting up of a new canteen for students and staff.

Further, with regard to the premises of the University, action is being taken by the Administration of the University to repair lighting system in the playground as well as fog lights, etc on the premises.

Health and Science laboratory equipment have also been purchased. Arrangements have been made for the purchase of office materials, printers, office furniture, smoke detectors and also sport equipments.

Madam Speaker, the capital budget of Rs11m. was made available to the University for the financial year 2016/2017 for infrastructure

improvement and upgrading works, as well as the purchase of additional equipment to improve the working and study environment of the students and staff. Given the scope of the necessary infrastructural works identified, the capital budgets allocated these past few years have not been sufficient.

Since last year, several meetings have been held with students pertaining to infrastructure. UTM has made a request for funds in connection with the following

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- (1) Extension of the students' common room;
- (2) The second and third phases of the University Integrated Information System;
- (3) Improvement to existing building and purchase of equipment and furniture;
- (4) Construction of a UTM tower on the land vested by the Ministry. My Ministry has already put at the disposal of the UTM a plot of land at La Tour Koenig for this purpose. This will be an educational building which will house facilities for university students.

Madam Speaker, proposals are being made in the context of the Budget 2017/2018 for funds to be made available for infrastructure improvement under a dedicated fund. This will enable UTM to address the issue of infrastructural improvement on a fast track mode.

My Ministry has already engaged into discussions with the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development to pursue on these proposals in the context of the forthcoming Budget.

Madam Speaker, with a view to improving the state of affairs, the Ministry is, in fact, working with all public institutions of Higher Learning and has invested them with the task of working towards the provision of a workforce that will enable the overall development of Mauritius. And, in this context, the UTM Management is taking action to tackle all issues at the University, including the issue of shortage of staff.

The UTM has been taking relevant steps in the right direction and hence, recruitment has become effective for senior positions and others, as I have mentioned earlier, will be recruited in due time. The University has

also managed last year to set up its School of Health Sciences and this has allowed its recognition at the level of the Medical Council.

Madam Speaker, with regard to part (e) of the question, I would like to draw the attention of the House that UTM operates as a fee charging institution and its main source of revenue are from student fees along with a subsidy from Government to the tune of Rs11m. for this financial year. I would like to highlight here that since the setting up of the UTM in year 2000, the fee structure has remained unchanged.

In view thereof, my Ministry has made a strong plea to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development for an increase in the subsidy to the UTM for the next financial year. In addition, the University is, through its Board of Governors, exploring all possibilities regarding external sources of revenue for the institution.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, my question was what has been done in view of, what I maintain, the dismal situation there, but I will come to that, Madam Speaker.

I would like to ask the Minister whether she is aware that this fantastic University that has won a *bidon* leadership award, is ranked 239th - not in the world, Madam Speaker - in Africa, behind University of Ouagadougou, behind whatever everywhere in Africa. This University is 7,700th worldwide and 239th in Africa! What is being done to upgrade this University?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I have just mentioned that all tertiary institutions should be aiming at improving the state of affairs as far as quality is concerned. University of Technology Mauritius has been set up some 17 years back. It is growing and it is doing fairly well.

Now, I have just mentioned all the measures that are being taken at the level of the Administration of the University and at the level of my Ministry to provide the necessary scaffolds for the University to continue upgrading its capacities.

Now, if we talk about ranking of universities, then we can go and try to look for each and every university that has been set up over the past 50 years, we will find that the ranking does not come up solely on output results, but also on facilities, research capabilities and a number of other items.

So, Madam Speaker, I still maintain that the University of Technology has still a long way to go, has still improvements to make, but still it is doing fairly well.

Mr X. L. Duval: In the same ranking, the University of Mauritius is 51st, so we can do better. Even in Africa, it is terrible. We are used to be first in Africa everywhere except for universities.

Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the Minister what is being proposed to reverse the fall in student enrolment which, I understand, has fallen by 20% in March 2017 compared to March 2016?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, in Mauritius we are having a demographic decline. We all know that the student population is declining and this is related to demography.

Secondly, we must say that, at the level of the UTM, they have taken measures to improve on their entry requirements and, in fact, even the Ministry has given instructions that, as from this year onwards, entry requirements have to be upgraded. So, normally when we take up such measures, we do expect that the number of entries would decline and we must not forget that the Tertiary Education landscape is changing in Mauritius. Today, we have about 60 tertiary education institutions and, obviously, there will be a sharing of the student population.

Mr X. L. Duval: With the fall in student enrolment, the university itself is in jeopardy. I would like to ask the hon. Minister - she has said the requirements are being upgraded, I understand that now the University is enrolling students with only one 'A' Level.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, as from this year we have already given instructions to all tertiary institutions to ensure that all degree courses enrol students having three GCE 'A' Levels or two 'A' Levels plus two subsidiaries or three 'A' Levels plus one subsidiary.

This is the case for all degree courses. As for diploma courses, two 'A' Levels or at times in certain cases less is accepted depending on the course being dispensed.

Mr X. L. Duval: This must be something new. Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether she is aware that the University advertised six courses which had not been approved at all by the Academic Council, took the money of the unfortunate students who

wanted to study, never gave the money back and of the six courses, only two were finally approved by the Academic Council.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, the Tertiary Education Commission is following the situation closely and they are taking necessary measures to ensure that no students are penalised in any way.

Mr X. L. Duval: Surely, Madam Speaker, this is not sufficient, this is not acceptable. These people have paid for the courses and disciplinary action should be taken against whoever is responsible for this *maldonne*.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I am advised that in reality all the programmes for the March 2017 intake have been approved by the Academic Council.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, I want to know whether the six courses in the Health Sciences - we can come back on this if the hon. Minister is being misled - were advertised, none of them had previously been approved by the Academic Council which is the requirement and only two were finally approved?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I am aware of this particular case and I have been told that there was, in fact, a technical problem in the procedures and eventually it was rectified.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether this must be one of the only Universities in the world with no actual Professor working at that University.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, to become a Professor there are certain requirements. You need a number of years of service, you need a number of papers that you have submitted and you need to have published certain papers. If as yet no one has done it, I cannot expect them to have Professors. There is a proper procedure to nominate Professors. So, I expect that the University under the guidance of the Tertiary Education Commission will do the same.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, may I ask the hon. Minister whether she is aware that there has been no promotion for academic staff for the last six years and no promotion for non-academic staff for the last nine years?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, the UTM administration has informed the Ministry about this and necessary measures are being taken to provide the UTM with necessary funds to carry out these nominations. As I have said, prior to promotions, officers need to acquire new qualifications. We are talking about a University, we cannot just nominate and promote people until and unless we are satisfied that they have the necessary qualifications.

Mr X. L. Duval: No surprise that staff morale is low, if you have not had any promotion exercise for the last nine years! Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Minister ...

(Interruptions)

... whether she is aware of the five cases of harassment of staff whereby there have been public insults and general harassment leading to two cases of people being hospitalised and two police cases.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I have not been informed of any cases of harassment and in case there are such industrial issues, I am sure that it should be reported to us and necessary actions would be taken. I would also like to inform the House that the Tertiary Education Commission does follow such issues with the tertiary institutions.

Mr X. L. Duval: I will come back to the TEC in a moment. Madam Speaker, coming to the infrastructure, I have taken the trouble of taking some pictures, myself, in fact, and you will see that this University is still using latrines. Old style latrines! *(Interruptions)* You can laugh in a moment!

Stray dogs everywhere! No WIFI for the last year! This is the University of Technology in Mauritius which has no WIFI for the last one year, Madam Speaker. Look at the benches! People are meant to sit in the mud. This is what is supposed to be the creation of the Education Hub in Mauritius. I will table these pictures, Madam Speaker.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I have just informed the House in what condition the UTM was set up and how gradually measures were taken to improve the infrastructure. Now, what we are doing is that we are ensuring that they are getting a plot of land and they will be coming up with a UTM Tower. So, we have to give time. I do agree that the conditions are not ideal, but then we are a young country and the UTM is a University that has been set up only 15 years back.

So, I cannot expect everything to get perfect overnight. I would like to add, Madam Speaker, that all the improvements that have been brought to the UTM have been over the past two years and I cannot make for the 15 years.

(Interruptions)

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, ...

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Order, please! Order!

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, I would like to bring ...

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Order! Hon. Shakeel Mohamed!

Mr X. L. Duval: I would like to bring to the attention of the hon. Minister ...

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Shakeel Mohamed, please, don't make provocations, I said!

Mr X. L. Duval: ... that as at today's date with only one month left to the end of the Budget year, only Rs2 m. of the Capital budget has been spent up to now. Is she aware of that?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, all infrastructural projects have to be done following procedures. If procedures sometimes take time, we have to abide by it.

Mr X. L. Duval: Is the hon. Minister aware that in five offices belonging to the staff of the UTM, there is no electricity, including the office of the Director General, herself, and they are using *extension* at the University of Technology.

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Shakeel Mohamed, please! I am drawing your attention several times now.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, since we are talking about WIFI, I am informed that there are five new WIFI spots that will be operational this week at the University.

(Interruptions)

This week! So, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has the information!

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, you have asked your question. From a sitting position, please, do not interrupt the hon. Minister!

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, as far as electrical supply is concerned, in fact, the UTM does have its electrical supply and as I have mentioned earlier, maintenance work has to be carried out.

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Jhugroo!

Mr X. L. Duval: I am happy to see that the WIFI is coming this week, thank God! Now, let me tell the hon. Minister something else. There are no printers, no photocopiers for students' use. Concerning the equipment at the UTM, the software is so outdated that nobody can use it and it does not match with everything else. I have mentioned the stray dogs. The projectors are broken. It's a disaster!

Madam Speaker: No. Ask your question, don't provide information!

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, it's a complete disaster.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I have just mentioned in my answer that procurement procedures are being undertaken for procurement of office equipment for the office work as well as for students.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, if the hon. Minister who has never ...

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Rutnah!

(Interruptions)

Mr X. L. Duval: If the hon. Minister ...

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: I am sorry, hon. Leader of the Opposition!

Hon. Rutnah, did you make any remarks on the Chair? If you did, I will ask you kindly to withdraw it.

Mr Rutnah: Madam Speaker, I did not make any remarks on the Chair. I simply asked the hon. Leader of the Opposition to give way for backbenchers as well to ask questions.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Rutnah, let me just draw your attention to the Standing Orders that the Private Notice Question is the privilege of the Leader of the Opposition. I have seen several hon. Members from the Opposition side also who have asked the floor, but I cannot give them the floor unless and until the hon. Leader of the Opposition has exhausted his questions.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, the hon. Member does not know his front from his back because he seems to be sitting in the front. Madam Speaker, he should know the difference between front and back. Madam Speaker, I want to ask the hon. Minister quite seriously. She should visit, she has not visited ...

(Interruptions)

No, she went to a function there, she did not visit the premises.

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Ask your question!

Mr X. L. Duval: I know. I don't come with questions without knowing. Now, I would like to ask and invite the hon. Minister to visit because I

think she is being given all sorts of information. Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether it would not be essential, appropriate for this University to move to one of the new campuses that have been built, say in Pamplemousses and this, in fact, would be a solution to all the problems that are being witnessed.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, the University of Mauritius has just asked the Ministry support for it to come up with its UTM Tower. The building at Pamplemousses has got another mandate.

It is a polytechnic and if ever there is need for space, at the level of the Ministry and in consultation with the Tertiary Institution, we can envisage giving space. But then I understand from what I have received as request from the UTM that they are planning to come up with their own infrastructure, with their own building, so we will move in that direction.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, I would like to come to the grant from the Ministry of Finance. This UTM receives about a tenth, one-tenth of the grant that people going to University of Mauritius. I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether in view of the fact that there are poor families going there, some of these students maybe have not achieved as much, but they deserve a better fate than they are getting now.

I would like to really ask the Ministry of Finance, through the Ministry of Education, that this grant be substantially increased, doubled or trebled to give these poor children from poor families a chance.

(Interruptions)

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I must say that the present Prime Minister and Minister of Finance has shown that he has at heart the future of the children of this country and will take necessary measures to support all the student community of this country. I have no doubt about it.

(Interruptions)

Mr X. L. Duval: Well, Madam Speaker, I would have expected a commitment, better commitment from the Minister. I would like to say, Madam Speaker, that everything points to one problem at that University and I do not know if she will agree. Everything points to the new Director General, Mrs Ghoorah, everything points to there. She is

conflictual, she cannot get on with people, she does not lead anything, she puts in procedures which are so heavy that nobody can get any capital expenditure.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, ask your question!

Mr X. L. Duval: I am going to ask the question.

Madam Speaker: Ask your question! Now, do not make remarks on somebody who is not in the House to defend herself. I have said that several times.

(Interruptions)

Mr X. L. Duval: Is the hon. Minister going to get rid of this person and appoint someone who is not a political appointee to that post?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, the Director of the UTM has been appointed on the basis of her qualifications and competencies. I must say that when I took over the Ministry, the UTM had for the past, let's say, 12 years failed to come up with a proper Faculty of Health Sciences and the present Director managed to do it.

Secondly, the present Director has managed to change the number of courses provided from 47 to 60 and, according to me, she is delivering.

Now, it would be unfair for me to stand in this House and to point a finger at one individual for all problems and issues that are at the UTM when she has been there for only two years and the problems listed by the hon. Leader of the Opposition date as far back as 10 to 15 years. So, Madam Speaker, let us be fair and let us be true to ourselves. I think that such comments on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition on the Director of the UTM are totally unwarranted.

Mr X. L. Duval: I would like to ask the hon. Minister whether she is aware that this Director General comes to work at noon every day.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I am not aware of this.

(Interruptions)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Baloomoody!

(Interruptions)

Mr Baloomoody: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I get the feeling that the papers which are sent to the hon. Minister by the staff are not correct. There are six courses which have been published. The Minister just mentioned the Faculty of Health. Is she aware that there is a course which is called Diploma in Pharmacy Technician which was advertised in December 2016 without the approval of the Academic Council? The Director of TEC had to intervene and reprimand the Director General for her action and this course was subsequently approved ...

Madam Speaker: What is the hon. Member's question?

(Interruptions)

Mr Baloomoody: But I have to make my point...

Madam Speaker: No, I have given the hon. Member time...

Mr Baloomoody: On 22 March and up to date, students have paid their fees, this course is not still being run.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Baloomoody, what is your question?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I have just mentioned, in my answer, that there was a procedural problem with regard to these courses.

The Tertiary Education Commission has done the necessary and this shows, as mentioned by the hon. Member, that the Director of TEC did intervene, which shows that we have a system, a regulatory body that is functioning properly, that whenever there is some *maldonne*, some mistake, the TEC will redress the situation.

Madam Speaker: Hon Ganoo!

Mr Ganoo: Is the hon. Minister aware that the UTM Act provides that the accounts of the UTM and a report must be laid annually on the Table of the Assembly and for years this has not been done?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: I thank the hon. Member for drawing my attention to that and I will make sure that this is done.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Shakeel Mohamed!

Mr Mohamed: Thank you, Madam Speaker, it is clear from all the answers that the hon. Minister has given, that the students of UTM are not benefitting and are not having a proper place where education is being dispensed neither in terms of equipment, neither in terms of quality.

Madam Speaker: Ask your question!

Mr Mohamed: In the light of such decrepit situation that is being described under her watch, would she consider that all those students who are not being given what they are being paying for, that they be refunded all the fees that they have paid in the light of not taking advantage and abusing those students, playing with their future and throwing their future aside which she is doing?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, then I would request the hon. Member to mention whether we should also ask to refund students for over the past 15 years!

(Interruptions)

Mr Rutnah: Madam Speaker, can the hon. Minister confirm that on 23 December 2016, the Cabinet took note that UTM would be added to the list of institutions that is going to be added and recognised by the Medical Council for dispensing high level courses in Health Sciences and if that is not an indication of success and prosperity, then what is it?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: I totally agree with the hon. Member.

(Interruptions)

Mr Baloomoody: Can I ask the hon. Minister whether she is aware that there is no communication whatsoever between the Student Unions and the Director General? So, can I ask the hon. Minister what actions she intends to take to improve communication between the Unions at the University? This is very important. Academic freedom is very

important and we need that and this is totally absent due to the attitude of the Director General.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, I am informed that the management of the UTM has had meetings with the Student Unions.

Madam Speaker: Last question, hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Mr X. L. Duval: Madam Speaker, I would like to ask the hon. Minister, in view of the fact that they have about 3,500 students basically from poor families studying there. On this side, we agree that the situation is terrible, she is saying that the situation apparently is fine. The Prime Minister has the right under the law to appoint an inquiry...

Madam Speaker: Yes, hon. Leader of the Opposition, once again, I will ask you to ask your questions, please!

Mr X. L. Duval: The Prime Minister has the right to inquire, to appoint an inquiry. Will she, at least, agree - so that the future of these poor students are not jeopardised - on the Prime Minister setting up an inquiry to see who is telling the truth?

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Madam Speaker, whenever the need will arise, the Government will take the necessary decision.

Madam Speaker: Time is over. Hon. Members, the Table has been advised that PQ B/357, in regard to the Director of the Independent Broadcasting Authority will be replied by the hon. Minister of Technology, Communication and Innovation. PQ B/370 in regard to the members of the Commission of Inquiry on drugs will be replied by the hon. Prime Minister, time permitting.

Hon. Adrien Duval!

Mr Bhagwan: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes, can we take your point of order at the end of Question Time, please?