

Vivienne Roberts (2020). *The Barbados Community College experience: Leading the Anglophone Caribbean in a global movement*. E-book. 368pp. Mona, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press. ISBN: 978-9-7664-0762-9. US\$51.36.

In any sphere of endeavour, 50 years is a milestone. In a region not quite accustomed to telling its own story – *our* story – this golden tribute to one of our homegrown successes, is to be applauded, supported and emulated. In 1969, the Barbados Community College (BCC) opened its doors to the local community to cater to the island’s growing social demand for post-secondary education. That demand was not unique to Barbados. Indeed, in 1988, nineteen years after the establishment of the College, Professor Compton Bourne, one of the Caribbean’s eminent educators, in comparing the region’s education sector to a pyramid with the primary and secondary sector as the base and the university sector at the apex, had lamented the slimness of the middle segment and called for that segment to be expanded. The Barbados Community College fits the bill perfectly.

In this book, Roberts tells the story of an idea that took root, in advance of its time, in the mind of one educator; an idea which initially was little embraced or understood by leaders, by some educators themselves, or even less so by the general public. It is a story of patience and persistence; a lesson in creatively moving with ideas ahead of resources: of “riding a cow in the absence of a horse” as Roberts puts it; an adventure in finding niches between the cracks and opening up opportunities for the under-served; an exercise in “making haste slowly” as a former Principal of the Sir Arthur Lewis Community College in Saint Lucia, Sir Leton Thomas, described the slow progress of his own institution.

Roberts takes us on a compelling five-decade journey: from the genesis of the College amid strong political opposition, significant industrial unrest and scepticism by members of the public: to its expansion phase characterised by long waits on pending staff appointments to promised positions and delayed refurbishments of deteriorating buildings; to its years of growth and consolidation described as transformational and impactful, both locally and regionally, in providing leadership to emerging Community Colleges; to its outreach and reputation-building stage, as it blazed a trail that would take it from a two-year college (in which the highest level of offerings was the same as that of the sixth-form schools), to an institution which, by the twenty-seventh year of its existence, was conferring its own Bachelors’ degrees.

The setting up of the BCC is portrayed as both evolutionary (in that it was a natural process of development or maturity) and somewhat revolutionary, if we are to judge the mood of the country during these early years. Tensions were played out between leaders and visionaries, and their critics and detractors; between those who felt threatened by the perceived loss of their status, and the beneficiaries of new opportunities that some had hardly dared dream of. The BCC’s experience offers a fascinating insight into how opportunities can be lost or missed when people give in to emotion rather than reason. Given the 20/20 vision that hindsight affords, the College now proudly claims the pioneer role that it has played in the development of the Community College model in the Anglophone Caribbean. But Barbados and the region would have been the poorer for it had Erskine Sandiford – then Minister of Education – given in to pressures and criticisms and allowed the idea to be snuffed out even before it was given a chance to be birthed. Instead, what the region gained was the conceptualisation of multiple models of tertiary education provision offered in 20+ national institutions, opening up access to thousands of learners over the course of the 50 years under review.

Chapter 5 of Roberts' publication is devoted entirely to these national institutions: from the College of the Bahamas established in 1973 to the Anguilla Community College in 2009. The hope that Roberts espouses is that nationals of each of these institutions will follow her lead and tell their stories. From the thumbnail portraits that she has painted, we are not at all surprised that in each case, they have thought globally, networked regionally and acted locally; they have benefitted from global educational borrowing, but have customised their forms and functions based on local realities. It really has been a case of "Something old, something borrowed, something new." The reference to the nuptial tradition is not lost on the reader, as we are given insights into partnerships, alliances and twinning arrangements.

Another Caribbean educator, Errol Miller, had advised policy makers in the region not to be too parochial or insular in their development strategies; or as Nobel Laureate Sir William Arthur Lewis put it, not to clothe themselves in a coat of WestIndianness, but to adopt a global perspective while operating at the local level. We are not surprised then that Roberts has devoted three chapters of her text to the global Community College concept and counterparts, to situate the emergence of the Caribbean's own home-grown model. She acknowledges the benefits of global partnerships, agendas and targets; but she is also careful to highlight the importance of adjusting generic policy models, strategies and assumptions to local contextual and cultural specificities, and allowing for adaptation, mediation and negotiation. Indeed, the founder of the BCC had declared that the institution was neither to be a transplant from the United States, nor a hybrid between a university and a secondary school. That search for something different and contextually relevant would pay dividends as the institution steadied itself in the turbulent environment of increasing homogenisation and the practice of uncritical international transfer of strategies and policies that was so prevalent at the time.

The Barbados Community College has been hailed as the pioneer that led the Anglophone Caribbean in a global movement: one which was trying to respond to a growing social demand for tertiary education as the gross enrolment rate at the secondary level grew. The global tertiary sector has been characterised in the literature as reflecting three stages of development: the elite stage preparing students for roles in government and the learned professions; the mass stage providing the leading strata of the technical and economic organisations; and the universal access stage preparing large numbers of people for life in advanced societies. It was the mass stage that prompted and spurred the emergence of the Community College model. Roberts scours the globe for parallels, taking us on a whirlwind tour of the Americas, Europe, Africa, Middle East, Oceania and the Antipodes, giving us a bird's eye view of what obtained in each locality. What took root in post-independence Barbados was a fusion of these models to which was added a distinctive local element, inspired as much by the need to enhance the island's human resource capacity as by the aspirations and dreams of a community known for punching above its weight, as Roberts puts it.

The Caribbean Community College movement took on a momentum of its own as a subset of the broader global movement and a model of South-South collaboration. The institutions that have emerged are as varied as the Caribbean landscape itself; but they all have kept the core principle articulated by Errol Miller with his "adopting a global perspective while operating at a local level". The late Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies Rex Nettleford also speaks to the region's "inward stretch and outward reach."

This publication, however, is more than a historical documentation of the development of the BCC and the Caribbean Community College movement. It is also a contribution to the growing body of literature in the comparative education tradition and to the administration,

planning and provision of tertiary education in small states in the context of globalisation. The most enduring tenet of the comparative education tradition has been the significance of context and the study of difference. Indeed, “context matters” is one of the mantras of Michael Crossley, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Education at the University of Bristol, UK; while Didacus Jules, former educator and now Director General of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States, has consistently advanced the concept of “differentiation in a globalised context”. Innovative planning for tertiary education in small states represents both a strategic investment in scarce human resources and a strengthening of their capacity for critical international engagement. Much can be learnt by both small and larger states from the small state experience. Insights derived from the development of the Caribbean Community College model and from that of the BCC itself highlight the significance of contextual factors in the formulation and implementation of international educational policy and practice.

The Caribbean region remains under-represented in comparative education studies, in spite of the call for greater attention to the particular circumstances of small states. The field of education in these small states can benefit from more in-depth and comparative case studies of individual institutions and systems that are well grounded in context. English comparativist Colin Brock, in analysing the challenges of small scale, had observed in 1988 that, whatever the eventual answers to the problems of educational provision in small states might be, they will most likely be found if there is much more research and in-depth case studies of individual institutions as well as comparative analyses across the wide range of small states. This book is an excellent example of that type of study.

Roberts has taken the lead in the Caribbean region in narrowing the under-representation gap and in bringing the history of the development of the BCC and the Caribbean Community College Model to the domestic, regional and global reader and educational planner. But pioneers need followers to make their efforts count. Similar in-depth case studies of the region’s colleges – especially by inside researchers – will make a significant contribution to the mechanisms at work in the planning, management and administration of higher-level education in a small state setting. Indeed, the value of such “insider views” has been long recognised and advocated by both native and outside researchers, planners, policy makers and administrators. The Caribbean’s contribution and its successes in the democratisation of tertiary education need to inform global discourse. The region cannot afford to wait to celebrate the 50th anniversary of each of its national institutions for it to contribute to the global knowledge pool. The time to do so is now.

The publication, from Preface to Index, is extremely well researched and presented. Its tables, figures, photographs, appendices and references, apart from the analysis itself, is a veritable treasure trove. It is a significant resource for the Barbadian national who would be familiar with names and faces and places, with the BCC’s struggles and triumphs, with the missteps and surefootedness of the journey; and for the researcher, educational planner and administrator from outside who will be spared the daunting and tedious task of prospecting that goldmine of irreplaceable historical data from paper files scattered far and wide. This book project must indeed have been a labour of love for Professor Roberts.

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