

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Empowering Future Women Leaders Through GATE: The Way Forward

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**The underlying premise of the human capital theory in education is that higher education and training are costly but there are concomitant tangible and intangible benefits to the microcosm and macrocosm. The aforementioned theoretical underpinning of this study set the tone for this qualitative research project which encompasses informal face-to-face interviews with 61 full-time and part-time-female students at the University of the West Indies School of Business and Applied Studies Limited (trading as ROYTEC) concerning their experiences with Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE). The positive impact of GATE on each female student's life is unquestionable as her empowerment, development, and commitment are reflected in her answers to three open-ended questions. Further expenditure in higher education would be of benefit to any country seeking to improve its citizen's quality of life and standard of living.**

**Key words:** higher education and gender, higher education and government funded programs, human capital and gender

## Introduction

With a dearth of students entering the tertiary level system, the Government of Trinidad implemented the Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) in 2004 as a means of making tertiary level education affordable and available to all citizens seeking further education. Scarcity of a skilled and knowledgeable work force has led to the implementation of GATE. The continuous *brain drain* or the *human capital flight* has resulted in the more educated Trinidadians leaving the country. Such concepts relate to the migration of educated facets of the community in search of a higher standard of living which Mishra (2006) underscored is "embedded in the Caribbean psyche" (p. 13).

According to Docquier and Marfouk (2005) the Caribbean region has the highest emigration rates in the world and is among the top 20 countries in the world for the highest tertiary-educated migration rates. These issues fomented the need for a more educated population to remain in the region. In this expanding knowledge-based economy the need for skilled educated employees becomes vital in order to compete with the

global workforce. The pursuit of higher education is akin to economic success and a higher quality of life.

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago implemented the GATE program to ensure that, "there are no limits to accessing quality education" (Ministry of Science Technology and Tertiary Level Education, 2010, p. 1). The Ministry of Education website lists the following objectives of the GATE program:

1. To make tertiary education affordable to all so that no Citizen of Trinidad and Tobago will be denied tertiary education because of their inability to pay.
2. To widen access to tertiary education that will support economic development and promote social equity.
3. To build and strengthen a national quality tertiary education sector through both public and private Tertiary Level Institutions. (p. 1)
- 4.

Such objectives are currently feasible for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago but one wonders when the ripple effects of the current recession takes its toll on the Government, how viable and sustainable such a venture would become.

### **Importance of Higher Education**

The international trend, according to Goastellec (2008), is towards three dimensions of pressure with increased globalization, mechanization, and a knowledge-based economy. These three dimensions included: (a) demographic pressures, (b) economic pressures, and (c) political pressures. Goastellec (2008) credited higher enrollment in tertiary level institutions as a result of such pressures and indicated international trends toward such changes. She further stated that increased enrollment is proportional to the amount of funding available for tertiary level studies. Goastellec posited, "Every higher education has organized a specific student- funding framework linked to its societal understanding of higher education" (p. 19).

Congruently, Barr (2004) indicated that government funding for higher education is necessary and desirable. However, it takes a big chunk out of public spending and is not fully embraced by all countries. Keep and Mayhew (2004) underscored the need for expansion and funding in higher education. They stated, "The British government's policy towards expanding higher education is based on two beliefs - that it is necessary for an improvement of economic performance, and that it can increase access to better jobs by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 298). Most developed and developing countries adhere to such ideas and attempt to fund higher education, Trinidad and Tobago's government is no exception.

Keep and Mayhew (2004) further argued that it is doubtful whether a more educated workforce leads to more economic success. However, they envisioned the need for higher education as advances in technology and the necessity for skilled workers at high levels such as managers and leaders became essential to the successful operations of society and organizations. Moreover, Chipman-Johnson and Vanderpool (2003) highlighted the growing trend away from imported skilled labor such as accountants and lawyers in Bahamas to recruiting locals and becoming more self-sufficient in human capital as higher education enrollment continues to increase.

Concurrently, Machin and Stevens (2004) highlighted the importance of higher education in improving the marketability and social mobility of human capital. They viewed education as "as an investment, raising the future productivity of the individual and bringing other private and social benefits" (p. 157). With this in mind, the government of Trinidad and Tobago determined to develop its intellectual capital, has been spending vast amounts of financial capital in tertiary level education. Additionally, Thrall and Mecoli (2003) underscored the competitiveness of higher education funding in the United States of America, "business geographical analysis can convey to legislators the importance of a university and help garner political support for adequate funding" (p. 46). Higher education is seen as a means of minimizing the gap between the haves and have nots and an effective empowerment and leadership development tool.

### **Gender and Higher Education**

Another aspect of higher education is the empowerment of female students. Archer, Hutchings, and Ross (2003) noted the importance of higher education in redefining roles of gender, race, and class within societal structure. Higher education, viewed more from an androcentric perspective and beneficial to males, allows females to reaffirm themselves collectively and as individuals. According to Chipman-Johnson and Vanderpool (2003), student enrollment in higher education is increasing with female enrollment and graduation from Caribbean Universities far surpassing male enrollment. The aforementioned researchers projected a female/male tertiary level student-ratio of 2.6:1 and 3.2:1 respectively. This current trend in increased female enrollment is evidenced in this researcher's first year English class (September to December 2010) at University of the West Indies School of Business and Applied Studies Limited (trading as ROYTEC) where the female/male ratio is 2:1. This ratio reflects similar findings by Chipman-Johnson and Vanderpool on the ratio of females to males in the Trinidadian and Anglo Caribbean higher education classrooms.

As if heeding the call for a more knowledge-based and knowledgeable population, Trinidad's Government started the GATE program which increased student enrollment in higher education institutions by 125% to 100% from 2005 to 2009 with 64% females versus 36% males (UWI Annual Report, 2008/2009). It should be noted as well that the Graduation Valedictorians were females for each Faculty including the Faculty of Medical Sciences and Engineering for the year 2008 to 2009. However, for that same period four men and one woman were given honorary degrees. This indicates a paradigm shift in the socio cultural mindset vis a vis women and higher education where women have moved into positions of prominence.

Albeit, there were less female students enrolled in the Faculties of Medicine and Engineering, females emerged valedictorians with the highest Grade Point Average (UWI Annual Report, 2008/2009). This statistical information is substantiated by Conrad's (2009) findings where he acknowledged the inroads made by females in business and medicine but illustrated the continued disparity between male and female enrollment and graduation in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). These apparent lacunae in gender equity can be resolved with continued application of the human capital theory in education.

### **Human Capital Theory in Education and Gender**

Development of human capital is an invaluable element of exponential growth within societal and organizational cleavages. The human capital theory in education links "expected lifetime labor force participation to one's incentive to acquire effective training" (Polachek, 2004, p. 13). The costs and benefits to human capital attainment of self-empowerment are "increased lifetime earnings, how one conducts

himself/herself in everyday life as well as social benefits such as reduced crime rate, lower unemployment, and greater economic growth” (Polachek, p. 20). Adiya (2009) postulated that “expenditure on training and education is costly, and should be considered an investment since it is undertaken with a view to increase personal incomes” (p. 1). With the implementation of GATE, the emphasis on intellectual capital development is no longer individual but national and global.

Similar international programs illustrate a preoccupation with the empowerment, development, and commitment toward intellectual capital advancement. The European Commission (2009) conducted a study on research funding and gender balance and discovered silos in gender equality. The Commission developed strategies ranging from increasing the quota of females on committees in Switzerland and Slovenia to encouraging women to apply for funding and grants in higher education. Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, and Rankin (2007) captured the paradoxical nature of gender representation in higher education faculty and students, stating:

Women, who now make up a majority of undergraduate degree earners and approximately 46% of Ph.D. earners nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003), rarely make up more than 30% of faculty at Research Extensive universities. Although the total number of tenure-track women faculty in higher education has increased steadily for the past 35 years, this increase and women's advancement through faculty ranks are described as excruciatingly slow. (p. 1)

This example typifies disparities in gender equity existing nationally and internationally and is fodder for extended research.

### **Problem and Purpose of the Study**

ROYTEC is a branch of tertiary level education with the focus primarily on Business courses. Located in the heart of the capital of Trinidad, ROYTEC serves a diverse population of part-time and full-time students. The emphasis is on preparation for the working environment with Associate, Bachelor, and Masters’ Degree Programs in Business, Education, and Information Technology. Data garnered from the Student Satisfaction Survey for 2010, conducted by ROYTEC’s Quality Assurance Unit, indicated that 90% of students were very satisfied that programs offered adequately prepared them for the world of work. Ninety-two percent of students interviewed indicated that they were experiencing positive learning experiences at ROYTEC (UWI School of Business and Applied Studies Limited, ROYTEC, 2010).

Sookram, Basdeo, Sumesar-Rai, and Saridaki (2009) offered the caveat that rising crime rates in Trinidad and Tobago is cause for polemical debates in the political and academic realm. Their findings suggested a link between the “percentage of females in the labor force and the percentage of labor force with tertiary level education are important in determining

criminal behavior” (p. 2). The problem is that of the escalating crime rate in Trinidad and the high unemployment rate (Sookram et al.) indicated a paucity of economic opportunity and the spawning of developmental plans for empowerment of the human capital through GATE. Table 1 illustrates the number of murders and kidnappings for 1994 to 2011 underscoring the tenuous nature of the crime situation.

Table 1.  
*Number of Murders and Kidnappings 1994-2011.*

Year	Murders	Kidnappings
1994	143	
1995	122	
1996	106	
1997	101	
1998	98	
1999	93	
2000	118	
2001	151	
2002	171	29
2003	229	51
2004	260	28
2005	386	58
2006	368	17
2007	395	155
2008	550	11
2009	509	6
2010	485	4
2011	100	3

Retrieved from: Crime in Trinidad and Tobago.  
<http://www.ttcrime.com/stats.php>

There is an exponential growth in criminal activity in Trinidad and Tobago which Sookram et al. (2009) suggested can be stymied by an increase in higher education among the intellectual capital. The purpose of this study was to determine whether higher education in the form of GATE is having a sanguine impact on female students at a tertiary level institute in Trinidad. The central tenet of this research paper was to answer the question: What effect if any, does the GATE program have on female students’ life at ROYTEC?

### **Research Design**

In order to answer the central issue of the importance of GATE, the researcher conducted informal interviews with 61 full-time and part-time ROYTEC female students enrolled in the Associates’ Degree Program. The only demographic information requested was their age. Students were informed of the interview two weeks before the actual interviews were to take place and gave informed consent. According to Kvale (1996) and Mc Namara (1999) interviews provide in-depth information from participants and allow them to give details of their experiences while providing factual information. Turner

(2010) echoed similar sentiments, “interviews provide in-depth information pertaining to participants’ experiences and viewpoints of a particular topic” (p. 754).

I conducted the interviews in groups based on which class they attended. This resulted in some participants agreeing with what others had to say and adding their own empirical and anecdotal experience. A rapport was already established with students so it was easier to ask questions since they were open and willing to respond. The ethnographic interview technique was implemented to first establish a rapport and then when the researcher felt they were adequately ready to commence. They were asked the following: (a) *If GATE were not in existence would you be able to attend ROYTEC and have access to higher education?* (b) *How has GATE allowed you to continue your professional life and school life?* (c) *If the Government of Trinidad were to stop funding the GATE program would you be able to continue your higher education?*

I ensured that participants were cognizant of the purpose and nature of the inquiry and were willing to participate. Answers to the questions were recorded by the researcher with full participation. I expressed appreciation for their participation in the study. Participants felt that by participating in the study their voices would be heard and persons in authority would take note of how much of an effect the implementation of GATE was having on their lives. Low inference descriptors in the form of verbatim speech were implemented wherever possible to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the information given. Johnson’s (1997) interpretive validity was employed to record participants’ responses. Interpretive responses, according to Johnson, refer to the degree to which “participants’ viewpoints, thought, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood and reported by the researcher” (p. 282)

The positive impact of GATE on each female student’s life is incontrovertible as her empowerment, development, and commitment are reflected in her answers to open-ended questions, her Grade Point Average Scores, and the low attrition rate. Attrition rates for the period September 2008 to April 2010 were examined based on gender. Students were considered drop outs if they no longer attended classes after the first month of each semester. Performance scores and academic grades were also examined and determined that female students out-performed male students in English, Communications, Management, Business, Politics, and Organizational Behavior which are first and second year courses. The ratio of males to females in a Business school which is traditionally male-dominated indicates the proliferation of more female students.

### Data Analysis

Sixty-one female students taught by this researcher for the period January 2010 to April 2010 shared their higher education experiences. These students were selected based on their consent to participate in this study and the fact that they were enrolled in classes taught by this researcher. Students’

ages ranged from 18 to 42 years. The interview questions were validated using the “validity-as-reflexive accounting” procedure where “the researcher, the topic, and the sense-making process interact” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 125). The researcher then implemented “disconfirming evidence” to indicate recurring themes and categories (Johnson, 1997, p. 283). Empowerment, development, and commitment were the emerging themes when a content analysis of the responses was performed as well as analytical and topical coding. The extant research literature encompassed the aforementioned three themes and the significance of higher education on females. Roudi-Fahimi and Moghadam (2003) concluded:

- As female education rises, fertility, population growth, and infant and child mortality fall and family health improves.
- Increases in girls’ secondary school enrolment are associated with increases in women’s participation in the labor force and their contributions to household and national income.
- Women’s increased earning capacity, in turn, has a positive effect on child nutrition.
- Children—especially daughters—of educated mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school and to have higher levels of educational attainment.
- Educated women are more politically active and better informed about their legal rights and how to exercise them. (p. 2)

Such changes, this researcher viewed as empowering, progressive, and illustrated a commitment toward advancement on the part of females who seek higher education.

### Findings

During the process of inquiry the researcher checked the data for trustworthiness “credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability” (Lincoln & Guba (1985), p. 189). From the data garnered, there was the repetition of key descriptive words and phrases such as: “more focused,” “upward mobility,” “social networks,” “more vision,” “feel more appreciated,” “more constructive,” “feel more important,” “give me something to work towards,” “more vision for myself,” “working towards something,” and “the best thing that ever happened” which when analyzed quantitatively proved to be 80% of words subjects utilized during the interviews.

Initial coding based on content analysis indicated the preponderance of similar themes of appreciation, self-development, and commitment to the completion of the program. As ideas were repeated, three large themes emerged based on the questions asked and researcher’s expectations. They exemplified leadership qualities in the form of: (a) empowerment, (b) development, and (c) commitment. In their responses to the first question, students showed high levels of appreciation for the fact that they now had access to tertiary level education. Marshall and Rossman (1989) suggested a five mode analytical procedure in content analysis which involved: (a) organizing the data, (b) generating the categories themes

and patterns, (c) testing the emergent hypothesis against the data, (d) searching for alternative explanations, and (e) writing the report. When adhering to these five modes, the researcher found adequate content to validate the emerging themes of empowerment, development, and commitment. Themes were deemed important based on the percentage of recurrence throughout the content. The frequency of themes was recorded based on the data garnered. From a qualitative analysis of the content the following themes evolved.

From the data collected, the positive effect of GATE on each female student's life is indubitable as her empowerment, development, and commitment are reflected in her answers to open-ended questions, her Grade Point Average Scores, and the low attrition rate. Lumumba (2006) underscored the importance of promoting higher education among females, stating "that there are positive correlations between female educational attainments and capacity to make informed decisions about various aspects of life including health, marriage, and reproduction" (p. 12). Such traits spawn an empowered and autonomous individual.

### **Empowerment**

Gender Affairs Division of Trinidad and Tobago (2009) defined empowerment as "achieving control over one's life through expanded choices. Empowerment encompasses self-sufficiency and self-confidence and is inherently linked to knowledge and voice. Empowerment is a function of individual initiative which is facilitated by institutional change" (p. 9). This definition of empowerment encapsulates the recurring themes expressed by all 61 participants. Eighty percent of participants felt valued and treasured by their Government for implementing GATE for giving them a vision, hope and appreciation of tertiary education.

One 18-year old full-time student indicated, "I feel like I am working towards something." An 18-year old single mother expressed the view that, "I can see myself getting a better paying job after completing my tertiary education." One 19-year old female full-time student declared, "I would have only been able to have a secondary level education and not as much opportunities for an improved quality of life." Students were focused on improving their quality of life which this researcher saw as empowerment and development. One 20-year old part-time student indicated, "I feel that I can better provide for my child and even feel more prepared to help him with his school work." All participants interviewed underscored the importance of GATE as being motivational and allowing them to look beyond their limited fiscal means. Participants felt valued and looked forward to upward mobility job wise, were more focused and goal-oriented, and shared a symbiotic relationship with their peers.

Part of the theory of human capital in education is the view that outcomes are tangible and intangible. Empowerment which suggests a level of self-efficacy, self-concordance, and self-

actualization is part of the mainstay of the human capital theory for engendering self-directed behavior with both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational drivers. Implicit in this empowerment are qualities of self-discipline and self-management, the main components of resonant, amplified, and mindful leadership. Leadership in its embryonic stage involves empowerment and continues with the passion to inspire others to move beyond their comfort zone and challenge themselves (Covey, 2004).

### **Development**

Development is a process by which the members of society increase their personal and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources to produce sustainable improvements in their quality of life. It should be borne in mind, as a process, development can take many paths and the path(s) to development is often determined by legacies, the vision of society, the availability of resources, and the perceived approach for their use. (Gender Affairs Division of Trinidad and Tobago, 2009, p. 9)

The developmental aspect of GATE funding was very significant to participants who expressed increased vision for the future and suggested that they would be on the streets looking for jobs adding to the unemployment rate if it were not for the provisions made by Trinidad's Government. Participants also viewed GATE as the best action that could have been taken by the government and vociferously declared that they would protest if GATE were to be abolished. They understood the burden it places on taxpayers but acquiesce the need to continue funding in order for them to be afforded a better paying job and a higher standard of living. One full-time 18-year old participant stated, "I understand that GATE is a burden on taxpayers, however, we need it to keep us off the streets and I know we will protest if the government decides to abolish it." Since participants interviewed were second year students, they are yet to graduate. Therefore, this researcher is unable to ascertain the impact of the GATE program on this sample group in the future but can only record responses. Future tracer studies should garner more compelling statistical data to determine whether women leaders were spawned as a result of the GATE program.

Continuous self-development is a crucial aspect of any individual's aspirations toward honing and inculcating leadership skills. Development, individual and collective, can only be achieved through conscious and meticulous efforts toward fomenting a culture of synergistic Gestalt. Female students expressed that higher education allowed for personal growth and increased critical thinking skills.

### **Commitment**

Another component of effective leadership is commitment. From the responses garnered, students showed a strong commitment to higher education. Sixty percent of participants between the ages of 18 to 25 suggested that they preferred to

prolong motherhood in favor of a higher education and by extension, an improved quality of life. Informal interviews with 61 students indicated that 90% of these students at UWI ROYTEC would not have been able to afford tertiary education if GATE were not implemented. Ten percent of students interviewed indicated that if they were not in the classroom, they would be on the streets wandering with “no job and nothing to do.”

Students also expressed fears that were the Government to stop funding for the GATE program they would have to discontinue their education. Five percent of students interviewed were single mothers with children from ages 1 to 3 years. These young mothers were ages 19 to 23 and were being allowed to continue their education through GATE. They opined that through further education they could become more financially secure and could provide a higher standard of living for their children. Students also expressed a concern and desire to improve their quality of life. The commitment came from their views that they wanted to finish the program and continue to the Bachelor’s degree in order to better equip themselves and their children. All students interviewed expressed their satisfaction at the fact that GATE allowed them to be focused and work toward achievable goals for improved life and by extension a more committed work force.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Before the implementation of GATE by the Trinidad and Tobago’s Government, young, single mothers were unable to continue their education preferring to remain in a state of homeostasis. Today, with GATE Trinidadian women are finding their voices, making a difference in their children’s lives, and contributing to the country’s intellectual capital. Previously, young mothers were left to fend for themselves finding it difficult to actually continue higher education. Currently, the young mothers in this researcher’s classes expressed pride and joy that they were being given a second chance to continue their higher education. Women are embracing their strengths and abilities to create a paradigm shift in self-perception. Fewer boundaries seem to exist for the current female Trinidadian population. They feel empowered, committed, and motivated to work toward an objective and remain steadfast in this desire.

Arising out of the data from this study is further need for research in the form of a future tracer study to determine the success of the GATE program in creating and sustaining a leadership culture among women. This article expanded upon the body of information on the impact of higher education on women and government funding of the University of the West Indies (UWI) and ROYTEC (an affiliate of UWI) and its effect on the human capital. Nationally and globally, females are taking advantage of increased funding afforded to them, thereby fomenting a new genre of women, women labor force, and mothers.

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