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Professor Sir Hilary Beckles,
The Chairman,
Caribbean Examinations Council,
Prince Road,
Pine Plantation Road,
St. Michael,
Barbados

BY EMAIL

hilary.beckles@uwimona.edu.jm

Dear Sir Hilary,

Re: The CXC Debacle: A Student Perspective

My name is Khaleel Kothdiwala, known to the Caribbean Examinations Council this year as candidate 0300240317. I am a keen student who has consistently performed in the top percentile of my age range, throughout my academic life, yet I now find myself among the myriad students adversely affected by the inequitable grading system used by the Caribbean Examinations Council, to compute the grades of students in the July 2020 CSEC and CAPE examinations.

I refer to the grading system as inequitable simply because it has produced results which are significantly at variance with historical trends. Although the Council maintains that the 2020 cohort produced a slightly improved number of candidates attaining acceptable grades¹, this claim relies upon a misleading statistic which does not take into account the distribution of higher grades, nor the frequency of such grades from the traditional sources of those grades. The entire

¹ To elaborate on his point regarding the overall performance picture of this year's CXC examinations, (CXC Registrar Dr. Wayne) Wesley said about 92 per cent of the students attained acceptable grades in Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE), while 79 per cent of the students received acceptable grades in the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC): taken from <https://www.loopnewsbarbados.com/content/cxc-not-committing-review-overall-exam-results-despite-complaints-1>

debacle surrounding the release of preliminary results from CXC has rapidly degenerated into a regional crisis, forcing aggrieved students, parents and teachers to protest, on the streets, on paper and online.

My personal grievance with the generated results does not lie in any misplaced inflation of personal intelligence, but rather a certainty in my own abilities and performance, borne out by past performance. I have written numerous tests and examinations over my six years in secondary education. I do not approach these exercises as mindless rituals of assessment, but rather I take a clinical approach. To that end, I have rarely been surprised by a test or examination result, simply because when I have completed the assessment, in the time left, I undertake a methodical evaluation of my performance therein, considering:

- ✚ What I am sure I have answered correctly and completely, and would therefore gain the maximum marks for those questions;
- ✚ What I am not completely sure about, but I believe are fairly correct, and so would gain the majority of marks for those questions;
- ✚ What I am not sure about, and may contain inaccuracies, and so I may gain a minority of the overall marks for those questions; and
- ✚ What I absolutely do not know or cannot recall, and so I do not include those in my calculation.

This simple formula has always been effective, in that my 'bare bones' assessment completed while the test is in progress, provides me with the absolute minimum grade possible. Generally, the actual grade received is much higher than this minimum possible.

Having therefore perfected a system of self-assessment, it was bizarre, at best, and outrageous, at worst, that the grades generated would be so far off from my own assessment, which is almost always accurate, and when seldomly not, is only out by a statistically insignificant margin. Such a large divergence between my own assessment and the generated grade is therefore perplexing. On the face of it, it is quite possible that my system broke down, for the first time this year, in a disastrous way. However, one is quickly disabused of that notion when the protestations of students across the region are considered.

While one can fairly suggest that students are yet young and therefore, it is impossible for them to have completely 'perfected' the skill of assessment, what cannot be argued is that their teachers are similarly misguided about their ability to predict their students' performance. This is because educators across the region are called upon to do such every year with many students, and so over time, have developed skill in predicting such grades. It can be admitted that occasionally, a student will perform above or below expectations, but the historical record suggests that on a macro-level, there has been near-complete uniformity between the predicted grades and actual achieved grades. While I am not in possession of the actual statistics, I understand that those statistics have been sent by various schools in my country to the Barbados Ministry of Education to pass on to the Council, and the assertion which I have made above is completely borne out by those statistics.

Another indicator of the absurdity of the results generated is students' past performance. I have enclosed a transcript of my academic performance at Queen's College, Barbados, which demonstrates a consistent standard of superior academic achievement across disciplines and form levels. Such a consistent performance simply does not intersect with my supposed generated grades at CAPE Unit One (I will elaborate below upon the use of 'supposed'). A perfunctory perusal of the transcript will bear out such. More than that, a cursory examination of the historical performance of schools reveal that this year is an oddity. Schools across the region which consistently achieve a majority of Grade Ones, have this year, found themselves with the script flipped with a majority subpar performance not in one subject, or at one school or in one country, but across the disciplines, across such schools and across the fifteen constituent countries of CARICOM. Clearly, this is not an anomaly at one school, but a structural problem plaguing this year's results, as they clearly fly in the face of decades of proven performance. Registrar Dr. Wayne Wesley maintained that "*candidates' performance in 2020 can be compared to past performance trends.*"² This assertion by the Registrar is not in any way borne out by the reality of schools' performance.

² The quotation was taken from a video posted to CXC's YouTube page on August 11th, 2020 entitled 'Registrar's Message about Grading and the 2020 Modified Examinations'. Dr. Wesley went on to say that "*the basis of this confidence is that a candidate who is awarded a particular grade in 2020 will have similar characteristics and*

Moreover, the grades generated are themselves inconsistent. Not many students avail themselves of:

- ❖ Communication Studies (Grade I),
- ❖ Sociology (Grade I),
- ❖ Economics (Grade II), and
- ❖ Law (Grade IV [initially]), as I appeared to attain.

Economics and Sociology are both social sciences. In both, the Paper 03/1, as corrected by the teacher, gained a near-perfect score. My performance in both previously, as according to my transcript, was consistent. The sitting of the Paper 01 in both instances were held within 16 days of each other. I experienced no significant life-altering event which would affect my performance in Economics (which was the latter of the two exams). Both days, by my recollection, were ordinary, and I arrived at the examination centre on both days, well ahead of time and so being late was not a possible stressor. Therefore, one is permitted to wonder what could conceivably have gone wrong between the two? Furthermore, the breakdown of the profiles for Economics makes little sense. The first module, treating to demand and supply, is basic microeconomic theory, which essentially mirrors in large part, the microeconomic aspect of the CSEC syllabus (in which I attained a Grade I with all A profiles). It is in essence the simplest module. Yet, the profile in that module was returned as a B. However, I seemed to have attained an A profile in the third module, treating to distribution theory, although this was the module with the most unfamiliar content, and which I felt was my weakest of the three modules, in comparison to the other two, though my grasp of Module Three was still excellent.

I will not address the incongruity of a Grade IV in Unit One Law, as that is overshadowed by an even more eyebrow-raising irregularity. I accessed CXC's online student portal on September 22nd around 4:00pm. At that time, the results shown were as represented above. A follow-up check on Thursday 8th October at 8:22am revealed the same results. However, what is certainly intriguing is that that follow up check was prompted by the receipt, earlier that morning, of my

performance on the multiple choice and SBA papers as a candidate that was awarded that grade in previous years.” Video taken from <https://youtu.be/MDnAS8TsWTw>

preliminary grade slip sent to the school, which suggested that I had actually attained a Grade I with all A profiles in Unit One Law, and not the Grade IV with a C-E-D profile as still carried on the portal. Both versions carry the disclaimer that they are “preliminary grades”. What is highlighted is clearly a technical malfunction, as I have not applied, up to the time of writing, for a review of the grade. There is, therefore, no other plausible explanation, to my mind, for such a wide disparity in grades between the two. Yet, the Council maintains its confidence in its system, though clearly, my experience is proof of some collapse of those systems.

Those four factors – namely, students’ self-awareness, teachers’ assessment, students and schools’ past performance, and inconsistency of grades – combine to severely, and perhaps fatally, weaken the confidence of persons in CXC as an examination body. I take no delight in writing that. The Council is a regional institution which has grown from strength to strength and is well respected internationally, dispelling the initial doubts at the time of its establishment, and clearly demonstrating the capacity of Caribbean people to create systems for themselves, which would also be globally competitive. Therefore, the present debacle is truly regrettable for all Caribbean people who hold up our regional institutions as a shining light of our Caribbean civilization. It is, thus, in all of our interests to seek a swift resolution to this crisis.

Indeed, not only is this a harmful reflection of one of our institutions, it cuts right to the heart of the Caribbean story. The results debacle directly affects the very foundation of the success story of this region, of the aggrandizement of the working classes: education. For many students, who would, by dint of their scholastic merit, be allowed to lift themselves and their families out of the morass of inter-generational poverty, now find these dreams scuppered by these adverse results. It is heart-breaking to consider how many young people across the region will shelve their aspiration for higher education as a result. Being one of the most illustrious products of the Barbadian working class, and having been in the vanguard of education in the region, and more broadly for blacks to become true economic citizens in their own countries, you, Sir Hilary, understand better than most the importance of tertiary education to the pursuit of that goal. Undeniably, your activism, nearly 40 years ago, with respect to the Barbados Mutual company will forever be memorialized as one of the great battles in the war for black economic citizenship, and today, provides another opportunity for us to score another win for that cause, by giving to

the present cohort of CXC candidates, the same bright prospects, offered to those before them and for which they have so earnestly worked.

The clock is running out for many of these young people. Action must therefore follow quickly, particularly for the many who face looming deadlines, with respect to higher education.

In the short-term that means, in my view, an immediate rectification of the grading problem, which I sincerely hope is a recommendation flowing from the report of the Independent Review Team. The psychometricians at the Council must find a way to give appropriate weighting to the predicted scores (as was promised by Registrar Dr. Wesley³), so that fair and equitable grades can be generated this year, and which are comparable to previous years. Additionally, the process used to moderate Paper 03/1s ought to be immediately reviewed, as it has generated innumerable anomalies, and so in the interest of time, teacher scores should be accepted, where the sample of five did not deviate significantly from the teacher's grade.

In the medium to long-term, the Council ought to examine its internal administrative structures through the appointment of another Independent Review Team, with a longer reporting time and wider scope, with respect to their terms of reference. This review team can advise on the much-needed restructuring of the operations of the Council, to make it more adaptive to the world around it and more responsive to the cries of educators, who are tasked with teaching the Council's syllabi and preparing the students for the Council's examinations, as well as improve its crisis management approach, which has in the present incident, been woeful, and served only to do further harm to the Council.

Above all, the CXC must adopt a contrite position, recognizing its own fallibility, but remaining ever committed to the teachers, parents and students of this region. We need CXC, but we also deserve much better. This is my earnest appeal to you, Sir Hilary, and to the entire Council of the CXC.

³ CXC posted a video entitled 'Registrar's Message about Grading and the 2020 Modified Examinations' to its YouTube page on August 11th, 2020, in which the Registrar, Dr. Wayne Wesley stated *inter alia* that "the trends in teacher predictions over the previous years will be used to determine if the grade awarded is fair to the candidate". Video available at <https://youtu.be/MDnAS8TsWTw>

Concludingly, it would be of significant benefit to the public image of the Council to invite a small delegation of parents/students to discuss the way forward after the presentation of the report of the Independent Review Team. I, and many across the region, remain committed to an expeditious and mutually amicable settlement to this matter. That is in the best interests of the respective Ministries and political directorates in the fifteen constituent countries of CXC.

I look forward to an expeditious response.

Yours Sincerely,



Khaleel Kothdiwala

Cc: Hon. Michael Browne, Chair of CARICOM's Council for Human and Social Development – Education, and Minister of Education, Science and Technology, Antigua & Barbuda (sirmshb@gmail.com)

Hon. Santia Bradshaw, Minister of Education, Technical and Vocational Training, Barbados (minister@mes.gov.bb)

Dr. Wayne Wesley, Registrar, Caribbean Examinations Council (cxcezo@cx.org)