

Fostering an innovative population

High on the agenda for most of the world's nation states over the past few decades has been to increase economic growth through innovation. Like the quest to establish a 'knowledge economy', and the thrust to develop an 'entrepreneurial culture', the fostering of 'innovation' has become a powerful catchword. It has been trumpeted from the political pulpits of many countries as the solution to economic ills, and this has been shown by the comparative prosperity of already proven innovative countries, to be true. However, the road from less to more innovation is a long one and it is important that behind the popular catchphrase lies a detailed plan which focuses on the 'how' and not just the 'why' of innovation.

Before the 'how' of innovation can be established, the 'what' of it must be clear. In 1934, Joseph Schumpeter defined innovation as the implementation of a new or significantly improved *product, process, marketing method* or *organisational method*. Innovation is also commonly and correctly linked to the presence of 'creative destruction' in which an innovative process changes the structure of society, causing the death of old as it celebrates the new. However, this is not so much a characteristic as a consequence and it is possible for innovation to be absent of fanfare. In addition, though the sphere of Information and Communication Technologies has become the de facto repository for the innovative hopes of many nations, there are no exceptions to innovation and it should be nurtured everywhere.

Innovation can be nurtured in all sectors. However, to improve the likelihood of success of a national policy, time and money should be focused. It is not enough to state that resources and incentives will be allocated to the "non-energy" and "services" sectors. A definitive group should be selected which represents areas within which Trinidad and Tobago can most effectively increase its productivity via either the implementation or creation of innovative products, processes or methods. Once chosen; how will the focus on these sectors to produce innovations, take shape?

Using the arts as a possible selection amongst the proposed four, it can be said that by a combination of funding specific to research and development; funding specific to education; and funding specific to the operational realities of the sector, it will be hoped – and planned – that the arts industry benefits from improvements in its products, processes, marketing methods, and organisational methods.

In such a scenario, the future looks bright, but a lack of funding can quickly dim the lights.

A framework of financial and non-financial incentives must be created in order to foster innovation amongst people and to foster the funding of innovation amongst the private sector. Citizens and corporations will look to our government to secure macro-economic stability, engage in treaties which open trade, implement laws which protect intellectual property and labour, create a tax system which appears to 'pay back' in the form of incentives, and in general project good governance.

Quite apart from the legal and economic structures which can be developed by a government to see to the creation of such an environment, an integral part of the process lies in the improvement of our educational system. And though it may seem that a 'creative spirit' is something that can be unleashed with a little prodding, it is more likely something which must be carefully nurtured.

In our primary and secondary institutions, the banker of tomorrow should be encouraged to make something with her hands at a school invention fair while the software engineer of tomorrow forms part of a team presenting a brief for project funding at a business competition. With such a cross-pollination of skills at a young age, we will develop tertiary institutions – both of the university and vocational training variety – peopled by students who have learnt how to create things and also how to sell them, turning ideas into products and services more rapidly.