NINTH

REPORT FROM THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

EXAMINATION OF The administration of the CAPE Scholarship Programme as reported on in the Special Audit Report within the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2019.

Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
Cabildo Building
St. Vincent Street Port of Spain
Republic of Trinidad and Tobago



Public Accounts Committee

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) established by the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in accordance with Section 119(4) is mandated to consider and report to the House of Representatives on:

'(a) appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;

(b) such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the committee under any other enactment; and

(c) the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.'

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Mr. Davendranath Tancoo Chairman
Ms. Jearlean John Vice- Chairman

Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Mr. Adrian Leonce
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member
Mrs. Charrise Seepersad
Mr. Roger Monroe
Mr. Amery Browne¹
Member

Committee Staff

The current staff members serving the Committee are:

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Ms. Khisha Peterkin Assistant Secretary to the Committee

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Publication

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the Parliament website:

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¹ Dr. Amery Browne was appointed in lieu of Mr. Randall Mitchell with effect from January 12, 2021.

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Members of the Public Accounts Committee

TWELFTH PARLIAMENT, REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



Mr. Davendranath Tancoo **Chairman**



Ms. Jearlean John Vice- Chairman



Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy

Member



Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon

Member



Mrs. Charrise Seepersad

Member



Mr. Adrian Leonce
Member



Mr. Roger Monroe **Member**



Dr. Amery Browne **Member**

Executive Summary

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is the Parliamentary Financial Oversight Committee tasked with the responsibility of examining the Report of the Auditor General and Audited Accounts of Statutory Authorities and Bodies. The Committee presents its Seventh Report of the Twelfth Parliament which details its examination of the administration of the CAPE Scholarship Programme as reported on in the Special Audit Report within the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2019, highlighting its findings.

This report sets out the issues raised, as well as the observations, and recommendations made by the Committee to improve the administration of the CAPE scholarship programme by the relevant divisions of the Ministry of Education (MOE).

During this inquiry, the following issues arose:

- Scholars' National Service Obligation;
- Monies Owed by Defaulting Awardees;
- National Development Needs;
- Recordkeeping;
- Human Resource; and
- National Bursary Programme.

Based on the Committee's examination, the following observations were made:

- Despite the annual monitoring which gives rise to the SATD's Achievement Report, there
 were still consistent challenges in terms of some scholars not carrying out the required
 national service after benefiting from a CAPE scholarship. This brings up the issue of
 whether the existing penalties for non-compliance are sufficiently dissuasive;
- ii. The Committee welcomes the news that the GORTT has been repaid two-thirds of the total sums owed by defaulting awardees and is hopeful that the remaining one-third will be received without further delay;
- iii. It was previously noted as Issue 2 Defaulting Awardees that some scholars did not return to carry out obligatory service after their studies because their field of study was not in demand in Trinidad and Tobago. This, combined with the fact that two-thirds of scholars who do fulfil their obligatory service are in fact not placed according to national development needs calls into question whether the effectiveness as well as the value for money received by the nation from the CAPE Scholarship Programme have been reaching their full potential;

- iv. The Committee welcomes the savings realised by the MOE via the development and rollout of its in-house SATIS filing system; and
- v. The Committee welcomes the implementation of the National Bursary Programme and the robust funding allocated to it, and hopes that this type of support for high performing CAPE students will be maintained going forward.

Based on the Committee's examination the following recommendations were proposed:

- i. The MOE should report to Parliament on the following by November 30, 2022:
 - a. Further progress made in collecting the \$20,595,472.93 that remained outstanding as at February 2022 from defaulting awardees, including the sums collected and the sums still outstanding, if any; and
 - b. The systems put in place to ensure that scholars' debts do not become statutebarred.
- ii. The MOE should indicate to Parliament the action to be taken to strengthen the alignment of scholarship recipients with Trinidad and Tobago's national development needs by November 30, 2022;
- iii. The MOE should report to Parliament on the measures it plans to undertake to strengthen the effectiveness of the SATIS system by November 30, 2022; and
- iv. The MOE should submit a status update to Parliament on the implementation of measures to address the SATD's human resource challenges by November 30, 2022.

Introduction

The PAC of the Twelfth Republican Parliament was established by resolutions of the House of Representatives and the Senate at the sittings held on Monday November 9, 2020 and Tuesday November 17, 2020 respectively.

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago mandates that the Committee shall consider and report to the House on appropriation accounts of monies expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago and the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.

In addition to the Committee's powers entrenched in the Constitution, Standing Orders 111 of the House of Representatives and 101 of the Senate also empower the Committee, inter alia, to:

- 1. Send for persons, papers and records;
- 2. Have meetings whether or not the House is sitting;
- 3. Meet in various locations;
- 4. Report from time to time; and
- 5. Communicate with any other Committee on matters of common interest.

Election of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman

In accordance with section 119(2) of the Constitution, the Chairman must be a member of the Opposition in the House. At the first meeting held on Wednesday November 18, 2020 Mr. Davendranath Tancoo was elected Chairman of the Committee and Ms. Jearlean John was elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee.

Establishment of Quorum

The Committee is required by the Standing Orders to have a quorum so that any decisions made by the Members during the meetings can be considered valid. A quorum of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chair or Vice-Chairman, with representatives from each House was agreed to by the Committee at its First Meeting.

Determination of the Committee's Work Programme

The Committee agreed to a work programme for the Second Session of the Twelfth Parliament as follows:

- 1. Trinidad and Tobago Fair Trading Commission (TTFTC);
- 2. Office of Procurement Regulation (OPR);
- 3. National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago (NIB);
- 4. Trinidad and Tobago Securities and Exchange Commission (TTSEC);

- 5. Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries (MEEI) Follow-Up on Revenue Collection (as reported on in the Report of the Auditor General);
- 6. Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) Scholarship Programme (from the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for financial year 2019);
- 7. Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2021;
- 8. Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI);
- 9. Children's Authority; and
- 10. Heritage and Stabilisation Fund (HSF).

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process outlines steps taken by the PAC in developing the findings and recommendations of its examination of the administration of the CAPE Scholarship Programme as reported on in the Special Audit Report within the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2019.

The Inquiry Process included the following steps:

- 1. Identified issues in the Special Audit Report within the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2019;
- 2. Questions for written response based on the issues identified were sent to the MOE on June 22, 2020. The responses were received on July 8, 2020;
- 3. Examined the written responses received on July 8, 2020 and identified issues of concern;
- 4. Further questions for written submission were sent to the MOE on January 25, 2022. The responses were received on February 18, 2022;
- 5. Based on the responses received and the issues identified, the Committee agreed that a public hearing was not necessary;
- 6. Reported the Committee's findings and recommendations to Parliament upon conclusion of the inquiry;
- 7. The Report will be transmitted to the MOF as the Minister with oversight of the OPR for written response within sixty (60) days in accordance with Standing Order 110(6) of the House of Representatives and 100(6) of the Senate;
- 8. Subsequent follow-up will be carried out to monitor progress in the implementation of the Committee's recommendations.

Background – Caribbean Advanced Proficiency (CAPE) Scholarship Programme

History²:

The CAPE Scholarship Programme is administered through the Ministry of Education, to Advanced Level students who have excelled at CAPE³.

- Prior to the establishment of the Personnel Department, the administration of scholarships granted by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago was undertaken by the Ministry of Education and later on, by the Ministry of Finance.
- When the Personnel Department was established in 1965, scholarship administration came under its purview, carried out by Scholarships and Advanced Training Section of the Training Division (SATD).
- In 1999 the SATD was transferred to the Ministry of Planning and Development.
- In June 2001 the SATD was placed in the Ministry of Human Development, Youth and Culture, which was renamed the Ministry of Science, Technology and Tertiary Education.
- The Ministry of Public Administration and Information was reformed in October 2002, and the operations of the Scholarships and Advanced Training Division were transferred to the Ministry of Public Administration.
- In 2015 the SATD was transferred to the Ministry of Education.

CAPE Programme Objective

Scholarships are awarded to eligible students for the purpose of pursuing a stated course of study for a specified duration at an accredited academic institution locally or abroad.

Whilst this programme is geared towards the developmental and educational needs of the scholars, one of the underlying objectives of the programme is to provide an avenue for the development of the human resource capacities, skills and competencies required for the national development of Trinidad and Tobago.

<u>Core Functions – Scholarships and Advanced Training Division</u> (SATD)

The SATD has responsibility for the administration of scholarships and long-term technical assistance awards offered by/ through the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Government scholarships enable nationals to acquire skills and training in areas that are critical to the development of the country. The core functions, which devolve from this main responsibility, are:

• Processing the offer of training awards to nationals;

² Ministry of Education SATD Division, *A Brief History of the Scholarships and Advanced Training Division*, accessed January 12, 2022: https://www.scholarships.moe.gov.tt/history/

³ Report of the Auditor General FY 2019, page 101.

- Serving as the Secretariat of the Scholarship Selection Committee and the Scholarship Review Committee;
- Implementing procedures to enable successful candidates to take up their awards;
- Servicing awards, monitoring the progress of trainees and ensuring that they make themselves available to fulfil their contractual obligations;
- Facilitating the placement of returned scholars;
- Ensuring the recovery of monies spent on awards in the case of defaulting trainees.

UNIT	MAIN AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY
Selections Secretariat	 Provides support to the selection committee and manages the scholarship application process.
Verification Unit & Contract Administration	 Collects documents from the scholar and ensures that they meet the requirements set by the Division; and Liaises with the scholar and other stakeholders for the execution of contract.
Monitoring Performance and Compliance Unit	 Monitors the scholars' performance and maintains communication throughout studies; Monitors payments paid to and behalf of scholars.
Exceptions Unit	 Provides advice and processes requests for services Deferral of Obligatory Service, Extension of Scholarship, Leave of Absence.
Breach Unit	 Treats with scholars who are in breach of their contract with the GoRTT.
Strategic Business Unit	 Formulates Policies and their enforcement; Seeks Placement and Employment of scholars; and Provides Technical support through the management of Information Systems.

Minister4: Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, MP

Minister in the Ministry⁵: Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julian, MP

Permanent Secretaries⁶: Mrs. Lenore Baptiste-Simmons and Mr. Kurt Meyer

⁴ Trinidad and Tobago Gazette No. 158, dated September 9, 2020: http://news.gov.tt/sites/default/files/E-Gazette/Gazette%202020/Gazettes/Gazette%20No.%20158%20of%202020.pdf.

⁶ MOE website, About Us – Executive Team: https://www.moe.gov.tt/about-us/ accessed September 8, 2022

Issues, Observations and Recommendations

During the examination of the administration of the CAPE Scholarship Programme as reported on in the Special Audit Report within the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Year 2019, the following issues were identified, observations made and recommendations proposed:

1. Scholars' National Service Obligation

There were challenges in getting awardees studying abroad to return to Trinidad and Tobago after their studies. In the FY 2019 Report⁷, the Auditor General listed the policies and procedures established by the MOE to guide the management and administration of the CAPE Scholarship Programme as follows:

- Policy governing the fulfilment of contractual obligation in respect of the President's Medal Award Winners;
- ii. Obligatory Service in respect of Scholarships and other Training Awards;
- iii. Deferral of Scholarships;
- iv. Extension of Scholarships;
- v. Policy on Placement and Employment of Scholars;
- vi. Policy on Business and Entrepreneurial Development for Returning Scholars; and
- vii. Policy on Requirements for Scholarships.

The Auditor General recommended that the MOE "ensure that the established policies set out for the management of the scholarship programme are adhered to and that all parties involved in the process are aware of the implications of not following the set guidelines" (para 5.128).

In its written submission dated Feb 18 2022, the MOE detailed the difficulties encountered in the monitoring of CAPE scholarship awardees. These included challenges in getting awardees to report to the SATD after studying abroad. The Policy on the Placement and Employment of Scholars requires that all scholars report in person to the SATD as soon as they complete their course of study. For those having studied in Trinidad and Tobago, the reporting time is within two (2) weeks of completion of studies. For those having studied abroad, the period is within one (1) month.

⁷ Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for FY 2019. Accessed September 8, 2022:

The CAPE Scholarship Programme was monitored annually to produce the SATD's Achievement Report. This Report identified Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for the annual monitoring of the CAPE Scholarship Programme. Among these KPI were the number of scholars who reported to the SATD on completion of studies and the number of scholars completed the programme of study and returned to complete obligatory service to the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Observation:

i. Despite the annual monitoring which gives rise to the SATD's Achievement Report, there were still consistent challenges in terms of some scholars not carrying out the required national service after benefiting from a CAPE scholarship. This brings up the issue of whether the existing penalties for non-compliance are sufficiently dissuasive.

2. Monies Owed by Defaulting Awardees

Not all monies owed by defaulting awardees was repaid. Among the previously mentioned KPIs for the SATD's Achievement Report, there were also:

- The number of scholars identified and pursued for breach action; and
- The amount of monies recovered on behalf of the GORTT.

The Auditor General reported that, whereas It is scholars' duty to fulfil obligatory service once their scholarship period has ended, between 2012 and 2019, one hundred and forty-one (141) scholars did not comply with this requirement. This represented 4% of the total three thousand two hundred and seventy-seven (3,277) awardees over that time period.

Awardees did not comply with the obligatory service requirement for various reasons. These included job opportunities outside of Trinidad and Tobago offering more lucrative pay and a higher likelihood of permanent employment. Some awardees preferred to simply repay the GORTT for monies spent rather than returning to Trinidad and Tobago. In other cases, scholars were unwilling to return as "their area of study was not in demand for the development of the country", according to the MOE's written submissions.

These defaulting awardees were required to repay the GORTT for scholarship expenses incurred for their studies. As at February 18, 2022, while \$37,081,718.96 had been repaid by defaulting awardees, there was still an outstanding debt to the GORTT of \$20,595,472.93, according to the MOE's written submission.

The Auditor General also highlighted the issue of 163 statute-barred scholars and identified this as a cause of "significant revenue leakages" (para 5.146). Statute-barred means a legal action that cannot be brought to trial in a civil court because too much time has passed. The Limitation of Certain Action Act Chapter 7:09 Section 3(1) sets the time limit at four (4) years. While fifty-four (54) of the 163 statute-barred scholars owed outstanding sums of \$13,666,928.14 to the State, the amount owed by the other one hundred and nine (109) scholars could not be determined as the relevant documentation was not provided to the Auditor General.

The Auditor General affirmed that "the Ministry of Education should ensure that procedures are followed to avoid scholars' debts becoming statute barred" (para 5.147).

In a response to a question from the Committee on the MOE's self-assessment of the mechanisms in place for securing awardees' compliance or, where applicable, repayment of outstanding monies, the MOE gave an assessment of 3 – Good, where 1 represented 'poor' and 5 represented 'excellent'.

Observation:

i. The Committee welcomes the news that the GORTT has been repaid two-thirds of the total sums owed by defaulting awardees and is hopeful that the remaining one-third will be received without further delay.

Recommendation:

- v. The MOE should report to Parliament on the following by January 31, 2023:
 - a. Further progress made in collecting the \$20,595,472.93 that remained outstanding as at February 2022 from defaulting awardees, including the sums collected and the sums still outstanding, if any; and
 - b. The systems put in place to ensure that scholars' debts do not become statutebarred.

3. National Development Needs

Most scholars were not placed according to Trinidad and Tobago's development needs. In a written submission dated, the MOE indicated that thirty-four percent (34%) of scholars had been placed according to national development needs in FY 2019. The FY 2019 Report of the Auditor General that "one of the underlying objectives of the programme is to provide an avenue for the development of the human resource capacities, skills and competencies required for the national

⁸ Longman Dictionary, Statute-Barred. Accessed September 8, 2022: https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/statute-barred

development of Trinidad and Tobago" (para 5.92). These areas include the fields of education, health, humanitarian disasters and emergencies, water and sanitation, food & nutrition, governance and conflict, public sector management, economic growth and the private sector, procurement and environment & built heritage.

Observation:

i. It was previously noted as Issue 2 – Defaulting Awardees that some scholars did not return to carry out obligatory service after their studies because their field of study was not in demand in Trinidad and Tobago. This, combined with the fact that two-thirds of scholars who do fulfil their obligatory service are in fact not placed according to national development needs calls into question whether the effectiveness as well as the value for money received by the nation from the CAPE Scholarship Programme have been reaching their full potential.

Recommendation:

i. The MOE should indicate to Parliament the action to be taken to strengthen the alignment of scholarship recipients with Trinidad and Tobago's national development needs by January 31, 2023.

4. Recordkeeping

The MOE developed its own digital filing system. Under Maintenance of Records in the Auditor General's FY 2019 Report (para 5.132), it was stated that the MOE took the decision to not renew the license for its electronic document filing system (Blackboard). This system was used to create an Electronic Filing System for storing and managing all information pertaining to scholars. Due to the outstanding arrears to be paid to Blackboard, the Ministry lost access to the software and their backup files.

In its February 2022 written submission to the Committee, the MOE explained that the lack of automated, centralised information repository and the need to conduct data entry affected productivity and diverted efforts away from work with scholars.

The MOE's ICT department developed data management software — the Scholarships and Advanced Training Information System (SATIS) — for the SATD. The SATIS was designed to improve the SATD's service delivery and enhance its interaction with scholars. All records were digitally formatted and uploaded to the system. Further, the MOE reported that it the implementation of the SATIS led to savings compared to using the Blackboard system, as the new system is an open source one.

In its February 2022 submission, the MOE rated the effectiveness of the SATIS up to that point as a three (3) on a scale of one (1) to five (5).

Observation:

i. The Committee welcomes the savings realised by the MOE via the development and rollout of its in-house SATIS filing system.

Recommendation:

i. The MOE should report to Parliament on the measures it plans to undertake to strengthen the effectiveness of the SATIS system by January 31, 2023.

5. Human Resource

The SATD needed greater staffing. In the MOE's written responses, the issue of insufficient human resources was cited as a challenge to fulfilling various aspects of the SATD's work. The MOE gave the example of not having enough staff to adequately monitor scholars who are carrying out their obligatory service. One of the KPIs for the annual monitoring of the CAPE Scholarship Programme identified in the SATD's Achievement Report was the number of scholarship applications processed within the required timeframe after posting on the online website and other medium of communication. This necessarily requires staff to carry out the desired rapid processing of applications.

In the MOE's July 8, 2020 written submission to the Committee, it was noted that amendments to existing policy were required to enable a more robust enforcement of the recovery of funds from defaulting awardees. This would include addressing the human resource issues that affect the SATD through:

- Retention of staff for consistency by offering public officers acting in positions with the opportunity to accept the position and remain in the SATD;
- Retention of contract officers at the end of the contract period, which would maintain consistency and institutional knowledge; and
- Implementation of a computerised contract management process that would alert the Human Resource Management Division of the Ministry to the approaching end dates of all contracts. This would facilitate a more proactive system of streamlining the new contract creation process, thereby reducing staff shortages.

However, almost two (2) years later, in its February 2022 written submission, the MOE conceded that initiatives to achieve this had not yet been implemented.

Recommendation:

i. The MOE should submit a status update to Parliament on the implementation of measures to address the SATD's human resource challenges by January 31, 2023.

6. National Bursary Programme

The GORTT made other funding opportunities available for non-recipients of CAPE scholarships. The Auditor General highlighted that in February 2016, Cabinet took a decision to establish annually the number of scholarships to be awarded. A ceiling of 400 scholarships was established, with quotas for each subject group (para 5.110). In its February 18, 2022 written submission, the MOE explained that the quota was ten (10) scholarships (5 Open; 5 Additional National Scholarships) awarded in each of the 10 subject groupings.

In light of this, the Committee enquired about other forms of governmental support available for top performing CAPE students who do not receive scholarships. The MOE explained that in 2020, a National Bursary Programme (NSB) consisting of 500 awards was approved by Cabinet. Students who are not awarded CAPE Scholarships may receive funding through the NSB, provided they meet the eligibility criteria.

The Committee learned that the estimated annual expenditure on the NSB is \$40,000,000. This actually exceeds the estimated annual expenditure of \$33,000,000 on the CAPE Scholarship Programme.

Observation:

i. The Committee welcomes the implementation of the National Bursary Programme and the robust funding allocated to it, and hopes that this type of support for high performing CAPE students will be maintained going forward.

Concluding Remarks

The CAPE Scholarship Programme is an important element in achieving Trinidad and Tobago's overall national development goals. Investment in education is part of the give (5) key necessary transformations identified in Vision 2030: The National Development Strategy of Trinidad and Tobago. The National Bursary Programme, though not part of the CAPE Scholarship Programme, is also a welcomed addition towards achieving national development.

The SATD needs to continue to do all within its power to secure scholars' compliance with the terms and conditions of the programme – most notably, the post-study service obligation. This is crucial so that the good and principled intentions of the programme are not taken advantage to fuel the brain drain which has for so long affected Trinidad and Tobago, similarly to other developing countries around the world.

The Vision 2030 Vision Statement aims to make Trinidad and Tobago a country with a "sound, relevant education system tailored to meet the human resource needs of a modern, progressive and technologically advancing nation". For this to become a reality, the alignment of the CAPE Scholarship Programme and the placement of scholars after their studies must be strictly aligned to the country's national development priorities.

Finally, the Committee reiterates its approval of the savings realised by the MOE thanks to the SATIS filing system. This will bring greater efficiency to the Ministry's execution of policy related to the CAPE Scholarship Programme.

Sgd. Sgd. Mr. Davendranath Tancoo Ms. Jearlean John Vice - Chairman Chairman Sgd. Sgd. Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy Mr. Adrian Leonce Member Member Sgd. Sgd. Mrs. Charisse Seepersad Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon Member Member

This Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Sgd. Sgd.

Mr. Roger Monroe Dr. Amery Browne

Member Member