



## **MINISTER OF LABOUR AND SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**

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20<sup>th</sup> March, 2019

Mr. Julian E. Rogers  
Managing Editor  
Trinidad and Tobago Guardian  
22-24 St. Vincent Street  
**PORT OF SPAIN**

Dear Mr. Rogers,

### **Minister of Labour Sets the Records Straight On-the-Job Training Programme well on track**

I refer to an Article which appeared in the Sunday Guardian of 17<sup>th</sup> March, 2019, on page A10, written by your Reporter Anna Lisa Paul titled "On-The-Job Training Programme Oversubscribed: Pressure for Job Seekers".

Firstly, from the contents of the article it would appear that Ms. Paul would have consulted the former Minister responsible for the On-The-Job Training Programme, Mr. Fazal Karim, Private Sector Representatives and even a current Trainee. Ms. Paul further alleged that she is still awaiting a response from the Acting Director of the Programme, Ms. Cupid, on the issues raised by Mr. Karim.

The Ministry wishes to state that our investigations revealed that when Ms. Paul contacted Ms. Cupid inquiring into various aspects of the On-The-Job Training Programme, Ms. Cupid would have asked Ms. Paul to forward all queries via email in order for a comprehensive response to be given. To date, neither Ms. Cupid nor any other Ministry Personnel are in receipt of any email from Ms. Paul to provide any information. As a consequence, it is rather unfair and unacceptable for Ms. Paul to convey the impression that Ms. Cupid was in possession of the "issues" and failed or refused to respond to the inaccurate statements of Mr. Karim.

Secondly, once again, as Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development, for the benefit of my fellow citizens, I am compelled to set the records straight as former Minister of Science and Tertiary Education, Mr. Fazal Karim, unleashes yet another episode of unsubstantiated and misleading information at the population.

This time it is on the otherwise serious matters relating to the Labour Market Status in Trinidad and Tobago and the steadfast and abiding mission and objectives of Government's On-the-Job Training (OJT) Programme.

In his periodic attempts at distorting the facts, Fazal Karim is once more reported to claim that the "Government's efforts to assist the unemployed are inadequate" and he is "calling for more aggressive efforts to be made through the On-The-Job Training (OJT) Programme to support tertiary level graduates in their efforts to enter the job market".

Mr. Karim who is reported as having estimated that more than 5,000 OJT applicants are currently awaiting placement and that, when added to the graduates from the Tertiary and Vocational Institutions, the figure could be very close to 10,000 persons yearly, was also reported as saying that the situation was further compounded by retrenched workers seeking employment via the OJT Programme and registering with recruitment agencies for jobs.

### **Retrenched Workers**

The reality is that the plight of retrenched workers in Trinidad and Tobago has been actively engaging the attention of the staff of the Ministry of Labour. They have been working studiously and diligently day after day putting in place robust, caring and durable mechanisms to address the perennial issue of retrenchment of workers in a structured and well-orchestrated manner. Not the least of these is the intensive work currently being pursued to enact Amendments to the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act Ch 88:13.

Progress on this initiative has reached the stage at which Provisions for Amendment to the Act are currently engaging the vigorous attention of the three social partners of NTAC, the Government, the Labour Sector and the Private Sector. At the conclusion of these deliberations, the intent is that greater levels of protection will be accorded to workers than exists under the prevailing provisions of the outdated Act. More on these initiatives will be shared with the population at large in the not too distant future.

### **Unemployment Rates**

It is of interest to note that the January 2019 CSO figures show that the unemployment rate in Trinidad and Tobago remained below 5.0% during the period 2012 to 2016 dropping from 5.0% or 32,400 in 2012 to 4.0% or 25,300 in 2016. This was the year when the citizenry began to face dark hours and treacherous waters with the price of oil plummeting abysmally way below forecasted predictions.

January 2019 CSO figures also showed that during that same period New Entrants to the job market ranged between 7,700 in 2012 to 5,900 in 2016, trends which were in stark contrast to the 10,000 yearly figure which was so cavalierly touted by Mr. Karim. New Entrants to the job market were lowest in the heady years of the previous administration: 2013 to 2015, ranging between 5,400 in 2013 and 5,300 in 2015.

### **On-the-Job Training**

In respect of the On-the-Job Training Programme, there is no way in which Mr. Karim could deny that he is fully and consciously aware that the OJT Programme was never intended to be an agency for employment of Retrenched workers.

The Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development reemphasises that the On-the-Job Training Programme (OJT) is a pre-employment programme which offers young people between the ages of 16-35 an opportunity for introduction into the world of decent work and focuses their attention on intelligent acquisition of practical occupational skills and experience within both public and private sector organisations

The programme provides for the placement of trainees for a maximum of twenty-four (24) months at five (5) clearly defined qualification levels. Attached to these levels are corresponding stipends ranging from \$2,750 at the lowest entry level of CXC Craft Level Training to \$7,920 in the case of the Post Graduate Degree which is the highest level catered for.

The OJT Programme provides for a steady and uninterrupted intake of applicants taking into account the continuous recruitment and exit of participants on a daily basis as successful applicants enter and exit the two-year programme day after day. Any allegation of oversubscription must therefore be seen as a lack of understanding and appreciation of the *modus operandi* of the Programme which necessitates a steady reservoir of potential talent as an essential component of the process, thus enabling Government to be unrelentingly responsive to the needs of the young and most times uninitiated unemployed.

Mr. Karim may do well to encourage the business sector in his constituency to be registered as willing corporate employers/partners with the On-the-Job Training Programme and work with the OJT in providing worthwhile training opportunities to the young gifted people of Trinidad and Tobago who are honestly and sincerely excited, eager and motivated to grasp the experience.

Moreover, I want to caution Fazal Karim that those who live in glass houses should definitely not throw stones. Upon assumption to office in 2015, the OJT Programme was placed under the responsibility of the Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development. An Audit review of the operations of the Programme revealed that:

1. A total of 5,049 discharged Trainees were without NIS numbers;
2. A total of 1,900 employees were assigned more than one ID number;

3. Based on the payroll scenarios a predication of possible GHOST stipend payment was established;
4. 1,353 discharged Trainees were registered within more than one Region within the Programme.
5. 76 Entry level Trainees stipend of \$2,500 were paid at the Post Graduate rates of \$7,000+;
6. 802 Trainees were mapped to more than one Bank Account;
7. 146 Bank Accounts were aligned to more than one employee.

These are just a few examples of the numerous irregularities we discovered in the operations of this Programme under Fazal Karim.

In order not to damage the brand of this Programme that former Prime Minister Patrick Manning implemented to assist the young people of this country, the Team at the Ministry quietly restructured the Programme and embarked upon a verification exercise which sanitized the list of active Trainees and removed the GHOST Trainees; cleaned up the operations; implemented a more rigorous check and balance to readily identify wrong doing. Today the programme operates on a highly efficient level with consistent orientation sessions for new Trainees.

We are also very proud that 90% of the Staff attached to the Programme were once OJT Trainees themselves, so they operate from a position of knowledge, compassion and empathy.

At present, we are in the process of collaboration with the International Labour Organization (ILO) for the conduct of a Rapid Assessment of the Programme as we seek to improve its design and effectiveness aimed at enhancing the experience of current and future Trainees of this very vital OJT Programme.

In closing, I wish to reinforce to all eligible young persons who wish to apply to the OJTP that they should adhere to the application process by visiting any of the Ministry's Offices and NOT any Political Party Offices. On the other hand, we encourage Business Owners and Institutions to register as Training Providers with the Programme. Interested persons can visit the Ministry's Website at [www.molsed.gov.tt](http://www.molsed.gov.tt) for fuller information on the application requirements, the transparent placement process and Office locations at which applications can be submitted.

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**Jennifer Baptiste-Primus**  
**Minister**

cc: Media Personnel