

close-up

Testing the labour pool waters

Jamaica's project to send skilled workers to Canada is moving forward quickly, but still faces some obstacles.

BY ADRIAN NIECZYM
STAFF REPORTER

After eking out a slim victory in Jamaica's September election, the Jamaica Labour Party needed to quickly show it could deliver on its platform of "Jobs, Jobs, Jobs."

They were fortunate that the outgoing People's National Party left them a project which, if it delivers on all of its potential, could see thousands of trained and certified Jamaicans getting good-paying jobs in Canada allowing them to then send money home to their families.

Even better for the government, a delegation headed by the project's Canadian partners—Okanagan College and the region's Economic Development Commission—arrived in Jamaica with a group of Canadian employers only six weeks after the election.

It provided the government with an excellent public relations opportunity as it put its own stamp on the project.

The government even agreed, at the request of Michael Patterson, the Okanagan College business professor who is a driving force behind the project, to cover my airfare and hotel costs so that I could cover the four-day excursion for readers of the *Capital News*.

What I found is a project surrounded by lots of optimism that is moving very rapidly.

But there are still some significant obstacles to get around and lots of work to do before the project will be able to deliver on all of its promises.

The project began earlier this year as an effort to broaden Okanagan College's inter-

national recruitment by arranging for student and faculty exchanges between OC and Jamaican colleges. It quickly snowballed into something much bigger.

"The advent of Michael Patterson as one of our professors of business just led to a whole series of opportunities," said the college's president Jim Hamilton on the last day of the trip.

Patterson, who was born in Jamaica but was educated in the United Kingdom, started at Okanagan College in January. He has proven to be very adept at facilitating high-level connections between officials in Canada and Jamaica.

Under a memorandum of understanding reached in April, Jamaica's national training institution, HEART Trust/NTA, agreed to recruit and screen certified tradespeople for possible employment in Canada. In August, 12 Jamaican carpenters arrived in the Okanagan to work for Greyback Construction.

Anticipating that this is only the beginning, the previous Jamaican government opened a liaison office in Kelowna and appointed Patterson honorary consul.

Looking to make its skilled workers more attractive for the Canadian market, the Jamaican government hopes that, with the assistance of OC, it will be able to adjust its training programs for trades people and health care professionals so that Jamaican workers can earn Canadian certifications in Jamaica.

"They can pass the Canadian requirements here. When they get to Canada, they go right into the job," Jamaica's Minister of Labour and Social Security, Parnard Charles, said in an interview.



STEVE KOEHL, Okanagan College's vice-president, international, talks with Jamaica's Labour and Social Security Minister Parnard Charles (above) following a press conference to open a job fair hosted by the ministry. Next to Charles is the ministry's permanent secretary Alvin McIntosh. Osbourne Mitchell (right), a trained Jamaican mason who wants to work in Canada, waits his turn for an interview with a Canadian employer at a job fair hosted by the Jamaican government. Sitting with him are his cousin Felicia Harrison and his daughters, Shauna Mitchell.

ADRIAN NIECZYM/CAPITAL NEWS



"We will be preparing people specifically for the standards required by Canada, both in the construction field and the medical field and any other field you wish us to prepare for."

With a lot of fanfare,

Charles' ministry put on a three-day job fair.

Okanagan employers Interior Health, Mateo Resort, Sun Valley Window Cleaners and the Good Samaritan Society were joined by two companies working on projects

in Alberta's oil sands, Ledor Construction and JV Driver. Between them they interviewed about 500 preselected Jamaican job hunters.

At a press conference launching the job fair, the EDC's Robert Fine laid out

the rationale for the Canadian delegation's presence in Jamaica.

"British Columbia and Alberta are the fastest growing provinces in Canada," he

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