



UNIVERSITY OF SIERRA LEONE

MISSION TO THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA

**By the Director of Media, Alumni and International Relations
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A delegation of University officials led by the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the University of Sierra Leone, Professor Foday Sahr travelled to the Republic of Liberia on 12th February 2022 to grace the Bicentennial celebration of the University of Liberia. The two universities signed Memorandum of Understanding in October 2021 at State House Sierra Leone in the presence of the then Chancellor of the University, President

Dr Julius Maada Bio who is now the Visitor of the University as stated the Universities Act 2021. The MOU has strategic deliverables including capacity building, collaborative research, exchange programmes and curricular development.

PROFESSOR FODAY SAHR PRESENTS The Role of Higher Education in the West Africa Sub-Region: Prospects and Challenges



Higher education in Africa dates to the Islamic institutions of the 9th and 10th centuries AD in Morocco and Egypt respectively, and in West Africa, the 12th century in Timbuktu (Ajayi et al 1996). While the continent can claim an ancient tradition of academic excellence, traditional centres of higher learning such as these have all but disappeared. What African universities adopted during colonialism were Western models of academic organization that did not

take cognizance of the critical socio-economic context, political environment and developmental needs of the countries, regions and the continent as a whole (Assie-Lumbumba, 2006).

In a 2002 report (2013 digital version accessed), the World Bank acknowledged that “[T]ertiary education is more than the capstone of the traditional education pyramid; it is a critical pillar of human development worldwide.” In the West African sub-region, there is growing recognition of the potentially powerful role of tertiary education for economic growth and development. Education provides essential skilled manpower for both the formal and informal sectors of the economy, provides the means of developing the knowledge, skills, and productive capacities of the labour force, and acts as a catalyst in encouraging modern attitudes and aspirations (UNESCO, 2004). In Africa, tertiary education plays a critical role in capacity building and professional training in support of all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is, therefore, imperative that countries in the sub-region rely on tertiary education to make a significant contribution to economic growth and competitiveness, which, by implication, require improvement in the quality of teaching, learning, programs and its academic institutions.

However, there is also a growing call from employers of graduates of HEIs that the latter are ill-prepared and/or poorly tutored for the workplace, lacking especially the so-called soft skills such as critical thinking and communication skills, and 21st century literacies of technology and information literacy to perform effectively in the workplace.

Research in higher education dictates that a new range of competencies in technology and innovation will be needed to meet the modern-day demands. This, no doubt, challenges higher educational institutions to adjust their program structures, curricula, teaching and learning methods to adapt to these new demands. In recognition of these challenges, greater attention should be focused on quality assurance as a critical factor to ensuring educational relevance. The new challenges facing our higher education institutions underpin the significance of establishing, among other things, robust quality assurance systems as necessary instruments for addressing them, together with infusing in them a culture of innovation and an out-of-the-box thinking mindset.

The Challenges Facing Higher Education in West Africa



A number of other factors are attributable to the growing challenges facing higher education in Africa. Paul Zeleza (2021), the noted Malawian scholar and higher education leader, and other scholars have listed a number of challenges facing HEIs today, including but not restricted to: retention of the outmoded colonial education policies; poor infrastructure; outdated curricula; poor national economic policies; old fashioned teaching and learning materials, techniques and technologies; mismatch between knowledge and skills; politicized academic leadership; the uncertain political atmosphere (for example, recent coups in Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso), and challenges posed by the environment. All of these leave the sub-region very vulnerable to both internal and external shocks. A few other deficiencies are discussed below.

Inclusive education

Higher education in the sub-region today requires the inclusion of all voices and ideas, regardless of class, religion, abilities, ethnicity and sex. Promoting inclusive education means ensuring curricula include the voices of current or historically marginalised populations; ensuring that the academy speaks to and with people, not just about them; enabling classrooms to be spaces in which all voices are heard and valued and where pedagogies are responsive to all learning styles, and creating faculties that recruit and promote staff fairly and inclusively (UNESCO-UNEVOC, 2004).

Knowledge production and publication are also critical in guaranteeing space for all to contribute to learning. To facilitate more inclusive discussions at the university level, there is need to interrogate how knowledge on West Africa is produced, published and consumed. Currently, far more literature on the sub-region is produced by non-African scholars than by those based in the region (Bloom *et al*, 2006). In the absence of voices from the region, scholarly discussion becomes uni-directional and skewed. This needs to change.

Funding

The sub-region faces a dramatic increase in student enrolment in higher education, which has not been matched by public funding (UNESCO, 1992). As Zeleza (2021) points out, there are too few institutions to match the explosive growth in student enrollment, for example, in 2015, there were only 1,639 institutions continent-wide for 12.2 million students. Effectively, public expenditure per student has also declined considerably, and this has inevitably led to deterioration in quality (UNESCO, 1992:12).

Other daunting funding challenges facing higher education in West Africa include the scarcity of credentialed and professional faculty; the inability of institutions to build new and maintain current infrastructure for a more conducive learning environment. Consequently, reduction in public expenditure and lack of prioritization of higher education as the engine of development continue to promote ineffectiveness and inefficiencies in West Africa. Alternative funding, especially for state-owned institutions which are in the majority, needs to be sourced.

Research

The research output from African universities in general, and West Africa in particular, is very low. Attributed reasons include a lack of research-experienced faculty, decades of brain drain, lecturers' heavy teaching load, moonlighting by faculty, and lack of research resources—such as, library facilities, information and communications technology infrastructure, and well-equipped laboratories UNESCO, 1992:13). According to the global publishing giant, Elsevier (2018), less than 1% of the world's research comes from Africa ([Africa generates less than 1% of the world's research; data analytics can change that \(elsevier.com\)](#), 2018. Accessed Feb 10, 2022).

The relevance of the research carried out is also questionable. Most faculty undertake research for personal gain, with the aim of publishing in internationally refereed journals for promotion purposes (Frey, 2007). The chosen topic is often not appropriate to national development. Much of the research is externally funded, and being determined by the funders, the topics may not be of direct relevance to national development; a good number of those addressing national issues are undertaken in consultancies which typically embargo the use and publication of data and results by the individual consultants (Atteh, 1996). Additionally, most faculty do not engage in collaborative research which leads to few insufficient multidisciplinary perspectives that are essential for tackling development problems. However, the same Elsevier study found that there was an impressive climb in knowledge production in Africa, over 38% between 2012 and 2016, the highest increase of any region, the period in which Ebola raged in the sub-region. Could this be the Ebola factor?

Access to research publications comprises another challenge. Research results at institutions tend to end up on their university library shelves—in theses and dissertations or advanced research journals which are not available to or understood by policymakers or communities. There is also a dearth of Africa-based research journals. The South Africa-based journal platform, *African Journals Online*, indexes only 556 journals, with only one from Sierra Leone and none from Liberia (www.ajol.info , Retrieved Feb 9, 2022). The vast majority of journals are often in print so they have minimal circulation even in-country and are not financially sustainable because of lack of institutional support.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in higher education is a relatively new phenomenon in West African universities. In 2007, only 16 out of 52 countries in sub-Saharan Africa had national quality assurance agencies, most of them recently set up (Materu: 20). The agencies have been created mainly to regulate the development of higher education provision, especially by the private sector, rather than ensuring accountability or improving quality. It is not surprising that these units are only emerging now in HEIs in the sub-region. In Sierra Leone, it is safe to say that only University of Sierra Leone and a private institution, University of Makeni, have functional offices, each set up about two years ago, although other HEIs are discussing the issue.

The main challenges facing quality assurance in Africa are a dearth of adequately trained professional staff in the national quality assurance agencies, lack of knowledge about the related process among the staff in the institutions, resistance from faculty to get fully engaged in the very time-consuming process of data collection and processing, and lack of funds to establish quality assurance systems in the institutions. Sensitization, capacity building, and funding are, thus, the main issues that need to be addressed in promoting quality assurance.

Having outlined some of the pressing problems facing HEIs in the West Africa region, this paper will now turn attention to suggested ways of meeting them, addressing both the familiar answers but also giving a few points aimed at provoking introspection at the level of campus leaders, funders and other stakeholders to stimulate collective action that will bring about transformational change in our institutions and wider communities. It is hoped that in doing so, we will re-examine and try to find answers to two fundamental questions, namely what is our reason for being and b) how best we can serve the current and future needs of our multiple stakeholders.

Prospects for Higher Education in West Africa

Re-Positioning the Role of Higher Education

The new economic growth in Africa and its integration to the global economy, the acceleration of technology and new production methods, have demanded highly trained personnel to keep the momentum of the economy. The role of higher education institutions in knowledge production is, therefore, recognized as one of the most important means for knowledge economy in the 21st century (Frey, 2007). Coined in the 1960s, the term “knowledge economy” refers to the shift away from the traditional definition of economy (of manufacturing, agriculture, industry etc.) to one in which knowledge **production and use** are key. For example, data are produced and shared in volumes these days and one can extract chunks



from them to make some meaning out of them (data mining) and use that meaning to make new products and applications. Per the 2002 World Bank report cited above,

Tertiary education institutions support knowledge-driven economic growth strategies and poverty reduction by (a) training a qualified and adaptable labor force, including high-level scientists, professionals, technicians, teachers in basic and secondary education, and future government, civil service, and business leaders; (b) generating new knowledge; and (c) building the capacity to access existing stores of global knowledge and to adapt that knowledge to local use. (p.12)

But can we in the sub-region truthfully say we do these and do them well? With our traditional modes of learning that de-emphasize critical thinking and focus more on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (that is, recall, description or correct use of facts) rather than the analytical or creation stages, we also ought to ask ourselves to what degree are our products *workforce-ready* and *adaptable*, those graduates that we "certify as worthy to receive" the degrees we confer on them. HEIs would have failed in their mission when their graduates cannot function in work environments that require these abilities, abilities that are crucial in knowledge economies. If we are doing these, then we can safely and gladly say our institutions are 21st century-compliant.

Universities in the sub-region ought to continue to reposition their role as the mainstay and engines of economic growth and development. Development partners, such as the World Bank, have also changed their development policies which now favor higher education on the continent. It can, therefore, be argued that as knowledge becomes central to the economy, so too will higher education.

National governments in Africa generally and in West Africa particularly have started to increase the amount of public funding allocated to higher education. The share of higher education in public expenditure on education in 1990 on a study made on 39 African countries showed a double increase of 21.2% as compared to the 1970s (World Bank, 2002). On average, sub-Saharan African countries spent 18.2 percent of government budgets on education 20 percent of which went to higher education in 2018, according to the World



Bank (2002). Various higher education reforms underway relate to finance, policies and strategies; management and governance; research and development, and leadership and autonomy, all made with the view to make the higher education sector integral to national and regional economic growth and development. Thus, universities are today assuming their role as key

stakeholders in economic growth and development of African nations. However, preparing for knowledge economies presupposes massive investments in technology infrastructure which at the moment faces anaemic growth in African institutions.

Promoting Collaboration between Business, Industry and Academic Institutions

In the sub-region, collaboration and building synergies between universities on the one hand, and business and industry on the other is slowly on the rise. Strategic public-private-academic partnerships are seen as the way forward to address the multiple challenges confronting higher education. Investments from the private sector in higher education is also on the rise but governance frameworks conducive to excellence, providing reasonable financial autonomy, and enhance accountability of the institution and the governing body are ensured. Such partnerships inherently call for decentralized institutional systems that promote devolution in the administration of resources, promote the use of management information systems for less opacity in administration, the use of resources, and the communication of results.

Re-Aligning the Relevance of Higher Education to the Market

Public-funded institutions alone will never manage to meet the huge demand for higher education. Private and cross-border higher education institutions, which already operate in significant numbers in Africa, should be encouraged because these can be beneficial in many ways¹. However, many of them tend to be profit motivated and sometimes offer poor-quality education so they therefore need to be regulated and quality controlled.

Re-alignment of higher education's relevance to new demands from the private sector became necessary on the eve of the millennium in order to respond to changes in the production and employment market. The gradual expansion of the private sector, the coming of international companies and foreign direct investments posed additional roles on higher education institutions to be responsive not only to governments but also to the new demands from private sectors(World Bank, 2002:13).

The introduction of the private sector into higher education is creating some sort of division of roles between public and private higher education institutions. On the one hand, public institutions focusing on science and technology, research and development, are establishing more campuses in rural areas, and focusing on graduate programs. On the other, private institutions are establishing themselves in urban areas focusing more on humanities and social sciences and mainly undergraduate programs (Bloom *et al*, 2006), although in the Sierra Leone landscape, private universities tend to target niche and more multidisciplinary areas in health, development and technology that the more established institutions have neglected or not caught up with.



Along with the issue of expanding access, however, concern over equity and quality of higher education provision is becoming a major concern of higher education stakeholders and policy makers. The role of higher education accreditation bodies therefore needs to be strengthened

and that more synergies between them, governments, the private sector and the HEIs themselves.

Knowledge to skill-based

Another critical prospect for higher education is the introduction and or re-introduction of curricula that emphasize skilled-based education—technical and vocational education. National governments and development partners now see the need to educate and train the young people for now, for the future and for change. What is required is a process that can produce a relevant and agile workforce which is flexible and responsive enough, not only to recognize the need for change, but also to anticipate and contribute to the process with innovative and progressive ideas². There is an increasing need for learners to have a range of transferable academic and vocational skills to operate independently and autonomously. Discussion on the need to teach students how to learn have been going on for decades but the requirement to teach the subject-based national curriculum along with the traditional methods means it has so far not been achieved. Measures on how to balance these options need careful thought and action.

Conclusion

In sum, higher education in West Africa needs more than just tinkering on the margins with processes and programmes. It needs innovative thinking for solving problems; responsiveness to local, regional and global concerns; alternate sources of funds to power the technological and infrastructural development that drive many of the needed changes; shifting from the ivory-tower to what I refer to call a more ecologically sustainable “bamboo-tower” mindset.



Future education and its practical application are key to the future of Africa. Future education must continue to change as education has always changed to meet the needs of business and industries. A strong economy depends on our region’s educational systems’ ability to provide a workforce to sustain our current and future economy. It is evident that a certain amount of future-casting of educational needs will become more important as the student population and their needs and mobility increase, and renewable financial resources from traditional sources decrease. The sub-region’s collective preparedness for these challenges is significant for West Africa.

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