

CONGREGATION SPEECH BY THE ACTING VICE CHANCELLOR AND PRINCIPAL UNIVERSITY OF SIERRA LEONE AT THE NATIONAL STADIUM IN FREETOWN

Your Excellency, The President of Sierra Leone and Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone, The Vice President, The Pro Chancellor, The Chief Minister, The Hon. Minister of Technical and Higher Education or his Representative, Other Ministers of Government, Members of Parliament here present, Your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corp, The Acting Vice Chancellors of Fourah Bay College, The Institute of Public Administration and Management, and the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences, Representatives of other Agencies, Departments and Directorates, Representatives of Local Government Authorities, Chairman, Tertiary Education Commission, Members of the Conference of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, Partners of the University of Sierra Leone, Our Honoured Guests, Alumni of the University of Sierra Leone, Academic and Administrative Staff members, Continuing Students, Members of the Press Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.



The Acting Vice-Chancellor and Principal of USL, Professor Brigadier-General Foday Sahr delivering his speech at congregation (February 2019)

We have assembled here today to observe the academic tradition of conferring degrees and other academic awards which we refer to as the University Congregation. This annual event is the climax of several years of hard work on the part of students and commitment on the part of the academic and administrative staff of the University.

The University of Sierra Leone has a long history of academic excellence dating as far back as 1827 when Fourah Bay College was established. Originally intended as an Anglican missionary school to train teachers in the promotion of education and Christianity, it became a degree granting institution in 1876, when it became affiliated with Durham University in England.

Since that time, nationals from countries in the West African sub-region and even beyond, came to Sierra Leone to acquire their university education. The quality of education provided at the time and over a long period was such that it earned Fourah Bay College and the country the enviable accolade of 'Athens of West Africa'. Most of the foreign nationals who graduated from Fourah Bay College returned to their countries and occupied very prominent positions including the civil service. In 1966,

the Sierra Leone government merged Fourah Bay College with Njala University College under a new federal system



Graduands at congregation (February 2019)

In 1980 the Institute of Public Administration and Management, (IPAM), and in 1988 the college of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences were also merged with Fourah Bay College to constitute the University of Sierra Leone. The University of Sierra Leone was further reconstituted by the Universities Act of 2005 when Njala University, which was a constituent college of the university, became a university on its own leaving Fourah Bay College, IPAM and COMAHS as the three constituent colleges that form the University of Sierra Leone.

Since that time the University of Sierra Leone has been producing graduates who have excelled in various fields of endeavour both locally and internationally.

However, in the recent past, our reputation and our standing as an institution of academic excellence suffered a serious set-back when the quality of our products was called into question. It became clear that along the line, standards were compromised by a number of factors including the activities of both staff and students. This trend became explicit firstly with the introduction of the ACCESS Programme after the year 2000. The Access Programme was originally meant to provide remedial classes for students who did extremely well in the sciences but failed to meet the minimum entry requirements for full time admission to the University. As time went on, this system was abused and seriously compromised to the extent that candidates who did not even have any credits in the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) were admitted to the Access Programme and were later enrolled for main stream degree programmes. In the end, the quality of the degrees that were acquired by such graduates is anybody's guess.

Another area that seriously affected the University in terms of its ranking and status as a once leading university is that its teaching and learning methods had become obsolete. Hence the University found it very difficult to cope with modern trends in its curricula and courses to be able to target the job market and needs of society. Reliable internet facilities that would enhance effective teaching and other administrative procedures were almost nonexistent.

The University has over the years experienced an exponential increase in students' population whilst lacking the requisite staff and basic facilities to accommodate the large number of students. Consequently, quality was compromised for quantity as the focus shifted from delivering quality teaching, to providing space for students.



USL VC&P and Chancellor

Mr. Chancellor, Members of the house of Congregation, another major factor that affected the operations of the University was the substitution of government subvention to the university with fees subsidy. Some years ago, for some reason, subvention was substituted with fees subsidy. What this means is that the amount of fees subsidy the university received from government, was determined by the number of students, at any given time.

Mr. Chancellor and Members of the house of Congregation, the University has established rules and regulations that have always been used to guide its operations. However, for some reason the policies of the university have over the years been deliberately flouted by both staff and students creating major difficulties for the university administration.

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of congregation, this is the situation in which the university found itself and has been grappling with over the years.

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of congregation, the question I pondered over upon assuming office as Acting Vice Chancellor and Principal was: *what do we do as a university to reclaim our past glory?* It is clear that the numerous challenges of the University require a collective and collaborative approach. It is often said that the ability to identify a problem is halfway through solving it. Now that we have been able to identify the challenges, most of which are not even listed here, and with the determination and firm conviction to address them, coupled with the view to restoring this Institution's past glory, we decided to title the theme of this year's congregation as: *"Regaining academic excellence in the University of Sierra Leone"*.

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of Congregation, In June 2018 all heads of Tertiary institutions in the country including myself were given specific Terms of Reference by the Minister of Technical and Higher Education containing Nineteen (19) elements with Time Lines. All the elements focused on the improvement of standards in our Tertiary Institutions across the country. The University of Sierra Leone therefore set itself certain benchmarks which have been guiding our operations.

University Policies

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, the way the University was run, was clear that the Policies that guided its operations for effective management and service delivery, needed to be reviewed. There was also the need to develop new policies to meet current demands and to be able to address new challenges and other emerging issues. Consequently, I decided to set up an Ad-HOC committee in September, 2018 to review the policies of the university and to formulate new ones that will guide our operations in line with modern management and best practices. The review process aimed at addressing issues that border on *Human Resource Management; Student Governance; Academic Affairs; Quality Assurance and University Finances*.



Recession from congregation

The document which has now been approved by the University Court will be made available to staff, students and the general public as it will be available on our website. I have no doubt that all stakeholders will be obliged to abide by these policies as efforts were made to adequately address almost all the policy issues that have been hindering the operations of the university.

University Strategic Plan

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, In addition to the policies, my administration has developed a Strategic Plan covering the period 2019 – 2023. The plan incorporates the benchmarks including the aims and objectives of the constituent colleges of the University of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation,

My administration has started the process of reviewing our curricula to ensure that we do not only train students to pass examinations, but to also make them partners in national development. The restructuring process of our programmes is in line with making our graduates find jobs easily or create jobs for themselves in order to make meaningful contribution to society. This we intend to do by involving the Business houses in the development of our curricula and the establishment of an Internship Scheme with the various business establishments for our students.

Standardisation and Quality Assurance

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, in a bid to ensure that the quality and standards of learning processes do not vary from one year to another, and to ensure consistency in the quality of the programmes provided, and that students graduating over a period are not assessed differently, and to further ensure that the quality of their degrees is determined by the designed curricula, my administration has decided to adopt academic accountability through a standardized quality management of courses and teaching materials. This, Mr. Chancellor will aim at:

1. Producing appropriate course and teaching materials for lecturers and students in an orderly and timely manner.
2. Removing the burden of preparing course and teaching materials from individual lecturers and assigning that responsibility to designated instructional appointees so that individual lecturers will focus on teaching and delivering their modules in a consistent and efficient manner
3. Forging partnerships with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) or Resource Persons who are in professional practice, but who have a deep understanding of particular subjects offered, as part of university courses, so that their contribution can add value to the existing internal academic resource of the University. Once standardization and quality assurance are in place, I am hopeful that not only will there be consistency but that the university education acquired will enable the graduates to succeed as part of today's work force.

Academic Affairs

Mr. Chancellor, Members of the House of Congregation, credibility in the conduct of examinations in the university is also a very important component of quality assurance. To reduce cheating during examinations, the university administration has commenced the process of installing CCTV cameras in all the major examination halls in the three campuses of the university. We are of the strong opinion that this move, will to some extent, deter cheating during the examination process. On the side of staff, the university is re-instituting staff evaluation by students. At the end of each module or course students will be required to evaluate the lecturer on both methodology and content. The evaluation forms generated will be used to make informed decisions.

Mr. Chancellor Sir, Member of the House of Congregation, upon assuming office in June 2018, one of the first things I requested my administration to do was to verify the academic qualifications of all staff to make sure that we have round pegs in round holes. Consequently, an ad-hoc committee was appointed to undertake this exercise and I am happy to report that 85% of the exercise is complete. We will seek the assistance of the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education to request the Ministry of Foreign and International Cooperation to facilitate the verification of all degrees and diplomas obtained outside Sierra Leone. Appropriate action will be taken against all those found wanting.



Graduands at congregation

Student Affairs

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of Congregation, in accordance with your directives that the ban on students union activities be lifted, all necessary actions have been taken to effect that directive. My administrations have met with a cross section of students from the three campuses and were assured of the university's commitment to accommodate and always listen to their problems and concerns. They were also assured that they will be involved in all discussions surrounding students' affairs. They were however reminded that the university administration continues to maintain a zero tolerance on cultism and that a student's union government is not a parallel administration in the university.

The ICT Portal and Computerizing Management Processes

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of Congregation, having reliable internet connectivity and computerizing our operational systems in line with modern management and teaching methods is an area in which the University as an institution of higher learning has seriously lagged behind. As I speak, almost all of our records are manually processed and handled, and the lack of a proper filing system has compounded this challenge in terms of access to information, records management and storage.

In our determination to address this short-fall, the university has launched the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Portal System and it has put in place all the necessary mechanisms to ensure that in March this year applications for admission into the University and registration will be done online. Furthermore, students and staff will be able to interact or interface more often through the internet in areas such as uploading of course material, conducting assessments, posting of grades, accessing students' transcripts and accessing library and other facilities all without necessarily having any physical contacts with the lecturers and administrators. I am delighted to report that the Chinese Government through the Chinese Embassy in Sierra Leone has contracted Huawei – an ICT Provider, to improve access to internet in all the three Campuses of the University. Once the necessary personnel and equipment are in place, a lot of time and resources will be saved making teaching and learning much easier.

Infrastructural Development

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, As part of the process to regain its lost glory, the University of Sierra Leone is making tremendous strides to improve its physical facilities in order to cope with the steady increase in students' numbers by providing an environment that is conducive for teaching, learning and research. A number of infrastructural developmental projects are either on-going or about to commence in our various campuses. At IPAM, the seven-storey multi-purpose building is now complete. All postgraduate and undergraduate classes are now being conducted in that building and this has significantly reduced our expenses on rental of premises all over the city.

In order to further expand on our facilities at IPAM, the University of Sierra Leone negotiated loan agreements with FEMAB, a development company, and the United Bank of Africa (UBA). The two institutions subscribing 75% and 25% respectively of a total estimated cost of \$50MUSD for the construction of a residential IPAM campus at Bureh Town in the Freetown peninsular which will provide residential facilities for about 3,500 students. The facility will also provide accommodation for staff, an auditorium with a capacity of 2000 people, a Business Centre and recreational facilities. The first phase of the construction will be completed within two years.

At the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences we have erected two more classrooms on top of the Library Building at the Faculty of Nursing at Lightfoot Boston Street. A Skills Lab has also been established at the Faculty of Nursing and all classrooms in the faculties of Nursing, Pharmaceutical Sciences and Basic Medical Sciences refurbished and fully furnished. We have also completed the construction of the perimeter fence around the COMAHS campus at Kossoh Town and at the Faculty of Nursing at Lightfoot Boston Street, a perimeter fence separating the College's facilities and the Kroobay Community has been erected. This has significantly cut down on incidences of theft at the faculty and completely stopped the intrusion of pigs into the faculty's premises from that Community.

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, at Fourah Bay College, a very wide-spread rehabilitation work is on-going under the BADEA Project. This project is now at an advanced stage and is expected to be completed by March, 2019.

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, the Faculty of Engineering in collaboration with the Sierra Leone Institute of Architects is constructing a new Architecture Department Building which is almost 90% complete. We remain grateful to Mr. Michael Colin, Managing Director of an NGO called "Make it Happen" SL/UK Ltd. and Dr. Adonis, for assisting with supply of Building Materials for the project.

Also at Fourah Bay College an Alumnus of the college has offered to fund the construction of a 3 storey building that will be bequeathed to the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture. The necessary survey and paper work with the Ministry of Lands have been completed and work will soon commence.

On behalf of the university I would like to thank this philanthropic Alumnus who prefers anonymity, for this wonderful gesture and I pray that other well-meaning Sierra Leoneans would emulate his example.

Registration of a Trade Mark and Business Centre

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, the University of Sierra Leone has successfully completed its Trademarks registration. The registration includes the brand name and logo of the University and its constituent colleges. The trademarks registration will prohibit the use of the name of the University of Sierra Leone (including its constituent colleges) and its logo by unscrupulous persons or business houses without the University's authorisation. The University is also in the process of setting up a Business centre for the sale of university products and memorabilia. This Business will be registered as a limited liability company. The registration of the trademarks and the setting up of the Business Centre will not only serve as an alternative source of income but will also help in marketing the image of the university while providing community service at the same time.



Conferment of a doctoral degree

Partnerships and Research

Mr. Chancellor, members of the house of Congregation, the University of Sierra Leone has taken the lead on health research and capacity strengthening within Sierra Leone in generating the much needed evidence to inform policy and practice. These include the publication in peer reviewed journals, policy briefs, conference presentations, research reports and the creation of close and enduring relationships with counterparts in the Ministry of Health and other bodies which are fundamental to the research action processes.

At COMAHS, there is a growing number of active research projects and training collaborations with international partners including Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine King's College London, King's Sierra Leone Partnership, Queen Margaret University, Berlin University, and the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. These partnerships have built upon the strong research interest within COMAHS, developed human capacity in health systems research and clinical trials which have also resulted in new and improved physical infrastructure.

At Fourah Bay College, Leeds University (UK) working in partnership with the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture will soon commence the manufacture of medical prosthetic devices at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture.

The Faculty of Engineering and Architecture is also working with Imperial College, London on the attainment of international academic accreditation for the programmes and graduates of the Faculty.

Fourah Bay College has also signed a number of MoUs with other institutions including the African Methodist Episcopal University (AMEU) in Liberia, The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana which with effect from September this year will be accepting staff from the University of Sierra Leone into MSc and PhD Programmes in Transportation and Logistics Engineering at the Regional Transport Research Centre in Kumasi. University of Sierra Leone could also benefit from, joint research supervision of students from the two institutions, and joint publications of research findings.

Mr. Chancellor Sir, Members of the house of Congregation in an attempt to support faculty members at IPAM for their upward mobility, a research basket has been created to support research. Faculty members

are only requested to submit research proposals which can be supported from the research basket and their findings published in journals which will contribute to their promotions within the university.

Capacity Building

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the House of Congregation, it is worthy to note that Human Capital Accountability is an essential component in the entire process of rebranding the University. Consequently, the University has designed a number of capacity building programmes for academic and administrative staff of the university which will take various forms ranging from workshops to providing scholarships for members of staff to improve their capacity. We aim to make our academic staff much more productive in terms of effective delivery of our programmes.

In that light, since June 2018, several strides have been made to secure scholarships for faculty members to pursue terminal degrees. The university administration will continue to reach out to agencies and institutions involved in education requesting them to provide scholarship to faculty members to pursue M.Sc and PhD degrees.

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Graduands/Parents

At this point, I would like to congratulate the graduands who having successfully completed their courses of study and who have converged here today for the purpose of receiving their certificates, diplomas and degrees – the climax of their academic pursuit in this university. Today is a day of celebration for staff, students and parents.

Graduation day bring back fond memories of time spent together brainstorming on difficult academic problems, social evenings spent together, the spirit of competition derived from sporting events and many other activities. Some have even found their life long partners.

You have been equipped with skills and knowledge in various fields and from this university you will be moving into different communities where you will be expected to make positive impacts. David Foster Wallace, an American writer once said “College education is about learning how to think, exercising some degree of control over your thoughts so you can choose what to pay attention to”.

One cannot tell where the future will lead you in your local community and the world at large. I can only admonish you; go out there and change the world for the better. And as you go out there, please do not ever forget all those who helped you in diverse ways including your parents/guardians, relatives, friends and the Government, to achieve your dream.

To you the parents and guardians of these graduands, I know that this is a moment of great joy and expectation. A moment of joy because your efforts have not gone in vain as your children, relatives and spouses have today achieved their dreams. A moment of expectation because having played your own part; you will be expecting your own reward from them. I will however wish to caution that your expectations might not be immediately realized as these young graduates need some time to settle down before they begin to reward you. So please be patient with them and continue to support them.

I wish to congratulate all graduands and to thank all faculty and staff for your support and for all that you have done to make this day a reality.



Guests at congregation

Mr. Chancellor Sir, members of the house of Congregation my 2018/2019 address is by no means exhaustive partly as time will not permit me to state everything that has either been done or ongoing. However, my address gives a retrospective view of the University, its many challenges, the achievements and the actions my Administration has taken so far to address these challenges. One of my objectives is to continue to review the internal mechanisms and processes with a view to strengthening and improving on the productive areas. I am of the firm conviction that with the steps taken so far and with the support of all stakeholders in education, we shall not only regain our lost glory but we shall soon assume the pride of place as a leading university in West Africa.

I thank you all