

CHALLENGES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN LIBERIA AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Mory Sumaworo¹

¹Ph.D. in Law, lecturer at Cottingham University Graduate School of Global Affairs and Policy and AMEU Graduate School of International Relations, Adjunct at Foreign Service Institute, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Liberia. Executive Director of African Institute for Development Research (AIDER). Email: mory6140@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.55327/jaash.v9i1.298>

(Received: 19th January 2023; Accepted: 10th February 2023; Published: 30th March 2023)

ABSTRACT

Keywords:

*Liberia; Education;
Tertiary education;
pre-university;
Education policy;
Africa;*

Liberia is confronted with lots of challenges such as preparing a productive human capital to run its abundant natural resources that have been either mismanaged or left discarded without anticipated development dividends. It can be categorically noted that among the negative aftermaths of the 14 years of Civil Wars (1989-2003) tha Liberia experienced, was massive migration of professionals and qualified teachers and academics to the exile. Thus, this outflux of professionals left an adverse effect on tertiary and education as a whole. However, despite the international and national efforts to reform the system, the situation remains fragile. Besides, the recent proliferation of fake credentials at some academic and professional corners are among the many examples of the challenges faced with the education sector in Liberia. Moreover, poor implementation of educational policies, ill-financial supports for institutions of higher learning and poor educational infrastructures, etc., are some of major practices that constitute challenges to higher education in the

country. Nonetheless, there have been some attempts and endeavors to reform and refine the system. These efforts had been done by the government itself and its local and international partners, such as USAID, the World Bank, the (IMF), the AFDB, A.S Charitable Society with its Heritage School Union System (a local Islamic leading educational and humanitarian NGO) the Catholic Schools System, the Methodist Schools, and others. The research is qualitatively conducted and observatory in nature. Hence, this article aims at looking into challenges that Liberia's tertiary education is confronted with, and how could they be mitigated and properly addressed. The study concludes that a radical reform and implementation of the policies are the way forward for meeting the market-driven education system in Liberia.

INTRODUCTION

Africa as a whole which Liberia forms a part of, has made a noticeable progress in educational sector over the last two decades. Nonetheless, there are still a lot of challenges to be handled and addressed as observed by the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its World Conference on higher education in 1998, (Goolam, 2011). Meanwhile, a sound higher education system is the gateway to developing market-driven and productive human capital for any given nation. If any loophole happens to be found in it, that will definitely lead to adverse effects on the nation's productivity as a result, its economy will adversely be affected. This is the scenario in many African countries, and more specifically, the Republic of Liberia, which had endured 14 years of Civil Wars (1989-2003) that ruined its infrastructures including educational facilities. Furthermore, while this tiny West African nation is trying to reform the educational sector, the Ebola Virus hit it and set as one of its biggest challenges ever experienced by Liberia.

Besides, in 2013, 25000 students sat for entrance exam to the University of Liberia the biggest State-owned university, but despondently, it was declared that none of them passed in the test due to their poor performances as the spokesman -Momodou Gataweh- of the University told BBC Focus on Africa "In English, the mechanics of the language, they didn't know anything about it. So the government has to do something" (BBC Africa 2013). On the other hand, the Minister of Education Mrs. Etmonia David-Tarpeh acknowledges the setback in Liberia education

system but raises a doubt about the possibility for the whole group to fail the test. Mrs. David-Tarpeh said, "I know there are a lot of weaknesses in the schools but for a whole group of people to take exams and every single one of them to fail, I have my doubts about that" (BBC Africa 2013). This argument between the State-owned university and the Ministry of Education suggests that there is a problem in the State's pre-university school system, which outcome leads to this massive failure of students in the enrolment exam of the University. Moreover, the reason behind this might be unavailability of vacant seats at the State-owned University, which implies involvement of the private sector to save the nation from its education crisis. Because if there are lots of private universities, and higher institutions of learning, the burden on the public university will drastically reduce and rate of students' enrollment will certainly increase. The problem happened because for a long time we were happy with the public, government-owned system (Singh, 2013). Another set of challenges facing the higher education in Liberia characterized in poor infrastructures, especially for science related disciplines, the STEM. For instance, lack of well-equipped and sophisticated science laboratories. Thus, this has made most of the students to prefer non- science colleges as a result qualified science teachers are scarcely found in the country.

SIGNIFICANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE LIBERIA POST-WAR DEVELOPMENT

In order to really understand the gravity of the damage that the tertiary education suffers and sustains from when it is not on the right trajectory, it is crucial to outline some socioeconomic, scientific and academic significance that higher education offers for development process of the country and more specifically in fragile states like Liberia. The Higher education is a driving force to sound and vibrant economic stability, sustainable peace, social development, scientific innovation and technological advancement and creativity (Yizengaw, 2008). All of these are highly needed in and by Liberia as strategies to make her to graduate from its current economic, social, and security situations to what is anticipated for its socioeconomic wellbeing. Thus, quality higher education certainly attracts the influx of Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) in the country with their huge capitals and massive career opportunities as they would be less reliant on bringing with them expatriates whose costs on the companies can huge and expensive. Having said that, below are some important benefits of higher education:

THE ECONOMIC BENEFIT

This aspect of higher education can be noticed in different angles; it increases the chances of employment opportunities, facilitates increment in income per capital; brings about a greater productivity and national development in all domains (Yizengaw, 2008). The economic benefit of tertiary education in Liberia is nowadays vividly witnessed as some multinationals may desire to employ qualified Liberians at key positions

with lucrative employment benefits and remunerations, but due to lack of qualified Liberians at times, the job might likely go to a non-Liberian. I had a discussion with the Director Labour Standards Division at the Ministry of Labour, Mr. Nathaniel Dickerson, he told me during our discussion that ‘a company approached them at the Ministry for an assistance of having a Liberian geologist to occupy a post, but unfortunately, they were not able to meet the qualified target, thus job went to a non-Liberian with all its benefits’.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL BENEFITS

Higher education offers and creates a greater chance for the people to improve their lives and the lives of their families. It also helps to generate ideas to create jobs for others by establishing new ventures, businesses and institutions. Politically on the other hand, tertiary education sophisticates the public with analytical tools formulate policies and promote the rule of law, democracy, good governance, and oversight responsibility on public offices. “Higher education enhances the political context by contributing to building civil society, enlightened citizenship, self-reliance, equal opportunity and skills and values of argumentative dialogue and reasoning, tolerance and respect (4). It facilitates national development by promoting democratic ideals, as well as intellectual and industrial competitiveness; by promoting greater social cohesion, peace, trust in social institutions, democratic participation, and appreciation of diversity in gender, ethnicity, religion and social class (6). It also improves the accountability of governments and generates independent research and analysis that supports the vibrant debate that can greatly improve the effectiveness of government policy and other services” (Yizengaw, 2008).

HUMAN CAPITAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is an undisputable fact that any country with high quality tertiary education system, professionalism and reliability on its own human capital for national development more likely encourages investors to do business with that country. Further, with a sound and quality higher educational system, the nation can secure and have well - qualified medical doctors, engineers, politicians, economists, and critical thinkers. Obviously, all of these are very important requisites for driving the nation’s development agenda, economic recovery, and socio-political reforms. Besides, capacity building in Liberia has been one of the government’s main priorities as the nation still striving to produce enough qualified engineers, medical doctors, and other science-oriented experts to meet its development demand; this is due to the fact that the tertiary education has been over the years dominated by students of Art colleges because of the poor equipment and facility needed in science and other STEM oriented colleges.

Scientific Benefit

Institutes of higher learning are not only designed for traditional transfer of knowledge and skills by delivering study materials to students. Rather, they are sources of technological innovations and creativity in science and other disciplines. Thus, those innovations and research works are of the utmost importance in addressing some of the challenges in Liberia.

Supporting other Levels of Education

The pre-university study is very crucial; it largely depends on the products of tertiary institutions. With a reliable higher education, other levels of education could be sustained and thus significantly produce qualified students for higher study and job market as well. In other words, secondary schools are in most often managed and taught by those with university qualifications. However, in the Liberian context, the scenario is quite different as most of secondary and high schools are being taught by those with the similar qualifications (High school Diplomas). At the university level, the vast majority of lecturers at most of the tertiary institutions in the country are Bachelor's degree holders. So, in this kind of situation, the large percentage of universities products would definitely be substandard as a result other levels of education could be adversely affected.

Challenges of Higher Education in Liberia

Admittedly, Liberia is not far different from most of its counterparts on the African continent in terms of confronting multiple challenges of tertiary institutions, notwithstanding massive educational reforms all over the world that are premised on the assumption that such reforms are good and could lead to an improvement in educational practices and process. These reforms are intended to address some of the existing setbacks in the higher educational system, they could be social, financial, academic, political and other factors such as security conditions. For example, Liberia's 14 years of Civil Wars affected school-going children and crippled parents and teachers alike. However, this aspect of the article will look into some of these challenges in detail as discussed below:

Governance and Leadership Challenge

It is believed that higher institutes of learning are synonymous to States, they can be better places to live if they are properly, technically academically and professionally managed. This does not necessary mean that those who are in the leadership positions have no requisite qualifications, rather it means applying sound educational and managerial skills to promote and maximize quality of the universities products (students). Further, most of the Liberian tertiary institutes including the University of Liberia – the State - owned - are being run in a substandard way as compared to its counterparts in the region. This substandardization always fuels tensions between the central administration and faculty members on one hand, and between the central administration and students on the other hand. Besides, these kinds of tensions can some time lead the university to be closed and classes to be suspended for months, while their

counterparts in the region and the rest of the world are striving to be high ranked universities in innovation and scientific research. Moreover, another related factor to this challenge is lack of innovation in leadership. That is; most of decision-making top managers have been in the system for years, as a result, they always prefer running those institutions in a way they were managed several decades back.

Lack of Sufficient Funding

Running a tertiary education requires sufficient funding and proper financial support in order to meet its day- to- day targets and overall objectives of the institution, atop of which is producing qualified students for the job market and national development. Further, proper funding for the higher educational institutions is a driving force for any highly dependable, reliable, and sophisticated scientific research works in different disciplines. Nevertheless, when financial support for universities-either because of the tuition that students pay is not enough to administer their affairs or the subsidy that they receive from the government or other partners cannot help them achieving the target is so weak and insufficient, then the overall objectives of the institutions will definitely be questionable.

Besides, this is the case in Liberia's universities and colleges as they struggle to compete with other universities in the World because of financial constrain, which leads to poor performance of professors and students. In other words, most of professors in Liberia universities have multiple assignments and jobs with different institutions in order to meet their financial needs and wants, so their full commitment and dedication to universities and colleges may be comprised. I meet couple of universities students and asked about some challenges they face from their lecturers and professors, 75% the respondents said that "We do have lots of highly competent lecturers and professors, but most them are working with other government agencies and NGOs, as a result of that, they assign some of their former students whom to them are capable of lecturing on their behalf. Nevertheless, that is not the case because those former students don't have even master's degree, in fact, some of them are still even pursuing their first degree"

Scarce of Faculty Members

Students and faculty members are major components of any tertiary institution; the ratio between these two variables has to be well-balanced according to the best international standard; some classes at Liberian universities can hold more a hundred students at once without a speaker. This can hamper effective and efficient dissemination of information and proper transmission of lectures to the students. That is to say, in the case of shortage of faculty member, there would be unreasonable crowdedness and congestion which – without a slightest doubt – could have a negative impact on the output of lectures and cripple the institution to reach its core targets and achieve its aims and objectives. Moreover, in the Liberian context, the

University of Liberia and other institutes of higher learning seriously confronted with this challenge.

Lack of Academic Research and Innovation Centers

Among the major objectives of a well-functioning tertiary institution is to conduct research works that help to solve or mitigating some of the existing problems or preventing the potential ones. Further, scientific innovation is of major concern of highly sophisticated universities and colleges around the world. However, in the Liberian context, universities and colleges are still facing difficulties to carry out academic research works and scientific innovations, there is no ISI journal in the entire Republic, and lecturers are not so active in publications; because of lack of proper founding for the research. Besides, due to the lack of science laboratories and modern technology at the tertiary institutions, the innovation is still unborn in Liberia, unfortunately.

Poor Academic Infrastructures

Having said that academic outputs and scientific and technological innovations are among the core aims for which tertiary institutions are established, this can be a mere theory if it is not coupled with physical educational infrastructures. For example, well-equipped libraries and laboratories with decent and encouraging study environment motivate innovation and scientific discovery. Nevertheless, Liberia's higher education lacks almost all of these requisites of quality producing qualified scientists and internationally reliable academicians in various disciplines. However, the blame does go to the entire system, never to those who found themselves in the academia, because no matter how professor or lecturer is courageous, if the institution's facilities are not encouraging, his/her output will not be compared with those who have the needed infrastructures to effectively work. I conducted an interview with Mr. J. Agostinho Bioh, Law School's Library assistant at the University of Liberia and also a post-graduate student at the same university. He said, "major challenge we face here is lack of effective libraries and sophisticated laboratories".

Poor Performance of High School' Students

It is obvious whether in Liberia or elsewhere for the higher institutes of learning to struggle and face challenges, if prospective students at pre-tertiary institutions are academically impaired. This always causes universities and colleges to put an extra effort to do what had to be done at high school level. As a result, it would affect other major targets of the university. Undeniably, this is the case in large percentage of high schools' graduates in Liberia as their performances in basic subjects such as Math, English, Chemistry and Physics are not satisfactory. Therefore, they get admitted to the universities which curricula do not observe this challenge, the product (graduates) can be very poor in job market, above that, it gives

a serious problem to the university's administration because some students with a poor performance may exceed regular time framework before they graduate occupying space for other students to enroll. Besides, the Minister of Education himself has admitted this fact in his recent show with Truth Break Fast Show (TBS) with the Truth Radio 95.1 when he said that there is a poor outcome of our high school but there are also solutions to that. For instance, providing textbooks to students and training teachers with science and math etc. (TBS 09/06/2015).

Centralization of Higher Education (Morovianization of the University Studies)

Almost 90% of modern universities and colleges with some needed facilities are based in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. Though, in the recent time, some community colleges have been established in other counties. However, because of most of the major activities, especially the commercial and administrative ones are heavily centralized in Monrovia, most of the students rarely prefer enrolling into those community colleges and Tubman University in Maryland (The second publicly-owned university in Liberia). Thus, this causes a serious problem for universities and colleges in Monrovia in terms of congestion and over-crowdedness in lectures' halls at the universities and colleges. Consequently, the study's environment is unfriendly, and students and lecturers' outputs can be seriously affected.

Health Challenge

It is pertinent to include medical as one of challenges that the tertiary education is faced with in Liberia. For instance, the Ebola virus outbreak affected Liberia education as whole and university study in particular. The outbreak of the virus led the universities and colleges to a total standstill for almost two consecutive semesters which – no doubt – jeopardized the whole system. Even after Liberia had been declared by the WHO Ebola free, the stigma and negative aftermath remain on schools and universities in terms because of poor attendance and other curricular activities.

The Possible Solutions to the Challenges of the Tertiary Education system in Liberia

Having admitted the fact that there are challenges that are confronted with the Liberian and tertiary education system, that does not dismiss the fact that they cannot be handled, fixed or sorted out. Besides, with sound and implantable policies by the government and other development partners to reform and refine the system, most of those challenges would be diminished. Thus, transformation premised on the best international practice would be achieved. Therefore, below are some suggested solutions to handle the setback that the systems is currently faced with.

Drafting and Introducing Sound Education Reform Policies

Governing educational institutions requires good policies that serve as a vehicle to reform and transform the system from what it is to a better one. The Liberian government has a quite a number of policies and regulations relative to a better education system that have relatively been able to handle and address some of the problems. Nevertheless, there are still lots to be done. For instance, decentralization policy of higher education, capacity building project for lecturers of universities and colleges to pursue their Master's and Ph.Ds. at accredited high profiled universities. It is not always about physical cash, rather sound reform and effective cooperation between government and its partners. Further, this has been emphasized by the former Minister of Education Mr. George Werner when he stated when he appeared on TBS (Truth Break Fast Show) "Education reform is not just about money, but we need careful analysis and cooperation between government and the people" (TBS, 9/06/2015).

Comprehensive and Market –Driven Curricula

Another strategy to minimize the challenges that the tertiary education in Liberia is faced with is to design study plans and curricula that work alongside with modern reality and the job market. However, this will give a strong background to the pre-university' students before their enrollment into tertiary institutions. In other worlds, the curricula in this context do not only mean theoretical study structures, rather they insinuate practical aspects, such as establishing the public and private libraries and laboratories for practical training to be rendered for high school students. Further, this will change the prevalent current trend of the large percentage of students preferring to admit into Art disciplines instead of STEM specializations despite the urgent existing needs for science graduates to help achieving the nation's development programs. Also, the modern curricula will help to put Liberia's universities on the list of top innovative universities in Africa and the rest of the world as it will encourage faculty members to undertake scientific research works and innovation for solving some of the problems in different fields.

Sufficient Budget for Education

Higher education in particular requires sufficient financial support to run its affairs; administration, research projects and innovation, upgrading facilities and infrastructures, social services and others. All of these are matter of proper founding with uncompromised commitment from the administration of the university. Unfortunately, most of universities in the developing world in Africa including Liberia due to lack of adequate funding to achieve what is deemed and expected of higher institution to do in an academic-wide. For instance, universities that always with outdated facilities, research and innovations will be dangerously crippled if there are no enough funds to update them. So, it is recommended for the Liberian universities and colleges to be adequately funded by the government by allocating budes for all what the institution needs to meet its target not remunerations for the staffs and faculty members alone. On the other hand,

the international partners such USAID, UNESCO, the World Bank, the African Development Bank need to be onboard to tackle this problem by providing financial assistance to colleges and universities as Liberia is now straggling to invest in different domains with many competing priorities; infrastructure, security, education, etc.

Encouraging Private Sector Involvement in Tertiary Education

The current reality suggests that most of success stories of higher education in the world are indebted to effective partnership between the public and private sector in providing quality tertiary education to the people. For instance, in Malaysia “private sector involvement was the leading part of the higher education reforms” (Aishira, 2009). Moreover, the effective role of the private sector will increase the enrollment rate to tertiary institutions as it would provide seats and lessen burden on the public universities in Liberia. This strategy has yielded fruition in many countries that were facing challenges that Liberia is now confronted with as it is evidence in the statement of Pramath Raj Sinha - the founding dean of the Indian School of Business (the youngest and first Indian B-school to break into the Top 20, according to the *Financial Times* Global MBA rankings)- when he was asked about challenges of Indian higher education faces. He said “The problem happened because for a long time we were happy with the public, government-owned system. Unfortunately, until a few years ago, India was in denial of the situation. While there was a government push to ramp up access in primary and secondary schooling, when it came to higher education, we were too focused on the few good institutions we have, such as the IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and the IIMs (Indian Institutes of Management) (none of which are in the QS Top 200, though” (Singh, 2013)

Proper Implementation of Higher Education Policies

Policy implementation generally have to be the step that follows policy formulation, and it is viewed as ‘the process of carrying out a basic policy decision. (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1983, p. 143).ⁱ However, in most cases in Africa and in Liberia specifically, lots of sound and smart educational policies are well-put-together, but the problem is lack of proper compliance with and implementation of those policies to meet their intended purposes. Besides, Sajid Ali is of the view that “the failure of educational policy in developing countries is largely attributed to the issues of poor implementation” (Ali: 2006 p.5)ⁱⁱ. Evidently, section 1.4 (c) of the Liberian Education law reads that the law should strengthen scientific and technological learning as a basis for speedy industrialization and economic advancement” (Education Law: 2002)ⁱⁱⁱ Nevertheless, since the passage of this law there has not been any well-equipped and sophisticated library or laboratory in the country especially at various universities and colleges. This implies improper implementation of this sound and development driven policy in Liberia. Also, the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) has recently issued a policy signed by its Director General Professor Edward Lama Wonkeryor, Ph.D. that requires President

and Vice President for Academic Affairs of all universities and colleges must possess a Ph.D.; not an honorary doctorate degree. However, this has not been fully implemented and adhered to by most of tertiary institutions in the country, and of course, these kind of compromises undermine the performance of the sector.

Establishing A Strong International Academic Cooperation

Having pointed out some of the challenges and setbacks confronted by Liberia's higher education institutions and difficulties that students and faculty members of the Liberian universities and colleges are faced with, it is, therefore, recommended to strengthen the academic cooperation between Liberian institutes and their counterparts in Africa, Europe, the United States and Asia and other parts of the globe. This would be among the best and solutions to further standardize the level of tertiary education in the country. By doing so, the universities and colleges will and may be hosting some highly qualified lecturers in different disciplines – especially in science and technology - to assist their fellow Liberian academics to produce market-demanded graduates and development-driven scholars, and conduct research works together. This has been the practice by many high-ranked universities around the World.

CONCLUSION

Higher education is the backbone and mainstay for sustainable development and growth of any country. Hence, in order for Liberia to really sustain what has been relatively achieved since her 14-year Civil Wars ended in 2003, priority has to be placed on the software component of development; human resource- preparedness which is and must be the real energy for development and sustained economic advancement; a solid software component of development is the pathway to a sustained hardware component of it. Further, research and innovation have to be highly encouraged and motivated through proper funding and budgetary support for the universities and their affiliate research centers considering research and innovation as the main objectives of tertiary institutions. Finally, it is fact that there are lots of challenges confronted with the tertiary institutions in Liberia, especially with the emergence and proliferation of fake credentials at some academic and professional corners as allegedly revealed by an activist group '**Campaigners for Academic Crimes Court-CACC-**' led by Mr. Martin K.N Kollie. However, the constraints and challenges confronted with tertiary education in Liberia could be mitigated and properly managed through adaptation of market-driven educational policies, curricula and unwavering political wills to enforce and implement the relevant laws and policies.

Note: This article is a revised version with some substantial correction of the author's 2015 research submitted to the 3rd Global Academic Meeting, GAM, 2015 that ran from 17-19 September in New York.

REFERENCES

- Aihara, A. (2009). Paradoxes Of Higher Education Reforms: Implications On The Malaysian Middle Class. *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 5(1).
- Ali, S. (2006). Why does policy fail? Understanding the problems of policy implementation in Pakistan-a neuro-cognitive perspective. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 34(1).
- BBC, (2013), Liberia students all fail university admission exam , <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23843578>
- Ministry, of Foreign Affairs (2002) An Act To Adopt The Education Law , Monrovia, Liberia.
- Sabatier, P. A., & Mazmanian, D. A. (1983) Policy implementation. In S. S. Nagel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Policy Studies*, New York: Marcel Dekker.
- Sajid, A.K., (2006) University, Institute for Educational Development, *Karachi ISEA* ñ Volume 34.
- Shreyasi Si., Challenges and Solutions in India higher education (2013), <http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/challenges-and-solutions-in-indian-higher-education/>
- Yizengaw, T. (2008) Challenges Facing Higher Education in Africa and Lessons from Experience, Africa-U.S. Higher Education Initiative, Washington D.C.