

Competitiveness in Higher Education Practices in Sierra Leone: A model for Sustainable Growth

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Abstract

This article has taken a step towards providing a critical discourse approach on the future of sustainable growth for HETIs in Sierra Leone. The system, as it is at the moment, needs a complete review and overhaul in order to move forward in competing with HETIs on a global scale. The government on its own cannot continue take up the burden of a 100% funding for HETIs in the country (with increase population growth rate) when the situation across the region, and the world is such that HETIs are making strides towards self-sufficiency / sustenance through high quality teaching and learning, and more importantly, competitive research ventures. A model has been worked out for a future sustainable and competitive HETIs in the country, and partnership with TEC, followed by some realistic recommendations for consideration, both in the present and the future.

Keywords: *Higher Education (HE); Sustainable Growth (SG); Sierra Leone; Quality Assurance; Competitiveness*

JEL Classification: *H52*

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) institutions across the world are making an impact in all corners of an economic system (both the public and corporate establishments), particularly in areas like growth in quality of manpower level, with the potential of creating high level of competitiveness in all sectors of an economy. It is assumed that such situation should be a norm, but a country (Sierra Leone) where poor governance (both at state level and university strategic administration) have more or less turned blind eyes on the relevance of quality assessment in teaching / learning and research output, it is obvious as to the reason why the once acclaimed Athens of learning in the West African sub-region, is no longer capable of featuring in the top or even the lower quartile of the continental league table of university ranking based on research output (University Web Rankings, 2015). Sierra Leone is faced with tremendous challenges, and to name a few, weak macroeconomic outlook in terms of constrained revenue signify that very little is invested in education to enable improvements to be recognised as evidenced in a 3.5% spending of the country's GDP on education in comparison to 3.9% average for all 'Least Industrialised Nations [LICs]' (Government of Sierra Leone Ministry of Education & Technology, 2013).

Higher education competitiveness is globally marked by a standardised system / benchmark, and one way through this is by the ‘*Quacquarelli-Symonds (QS) World University Ranking*’; a virtual listing of university positions grouped into classification of the best ranked universities, at world and regional level based on research outputs (QS Top Universities Online, n/d and Rauhvargers, 2013). QS Ranking system provide scope for regional information to be outputted about university research capacity; also, a system for determining quality of teaching and learning within institutions. This system of international ranking of HE establishments is normally supported by an individual country’s UK-style modelled ‘Quality Assurance System (QAA)’ measurement to judge quality of research output, teaching and learning, and also students’ satisfaction about provision within individual institutions. The role of such bodies is also geared towards setting high standards on quality of contents and degree conferment as expounded in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, 2014).

In a move towards global style quality assurance in education, Sierra Leone in 2001 adopted similar style QAA system, the ‘*Tertiary Education Commission [TEC]*’, with highlights of its two legal frameworks shown below:

- *The Tertiary Education Commission Act of 2001*
- *The Tertiary Education Commission Regulations of 2006* (TEC, n/d, 2011 / 2012, and World Bank, 2013).

Based on the above acts, TEC was mandated to execute the following functions:

- *Review budgets and expenditure of HTEIs; raise funds for tertiary education;*
- *Ensure funding for HTEIs are aligned with the socio-economic goals of the country;*
- *Sanction poor performing HTEIs;*
- *Ensure financial compliance with the GOSL laws;*
- *Promote fairness and equity in processes of student admission, staff recruitment, and promotion;*
- *Advice government on establishment of new institutions* (Government of Sierra Leone 2001, also in World Bank, 2013).

A further extension of the TEC Regulation (2006) also made provision for the recognition of the internationalisation of Sierra Leone’s education system, on account of the emergence of private and cross-bordered Higher and Tertiary Education Institutions (HTEI) in the country, thereby giving it the mandate to accredit all HTEI’s operating in the country, with over-site of ‘*standards, accreditation and quality assessment*’ (Government of Sierra Leone, 2006 and World Bank, 2013).

Rationale and Objectives

The rationale for this study is centred around the scope for exploring avenues to open up critical discourse(s) for improving competitiveness amongst HE institutions in Sierra Leone, more so in enabling the output of graduates to be measured at a competitive level through the marketization of qualifications on a global scale. The country has lagged immensely when it comes to research outputs, but seemed to be making good strides in the mass production of first level qualification (bachelor degrees), and for which gaps in standards are clearly visible (Guerrero, 2014).

On this note, the desired objectives of the study are outlined as shown below:

- Analyse structure of HE institutions in the country.
- Assess Sierra Leone’s HTEI performances at regional and global research profile in league tables.
- Assess TEC commission’s role is ensuring quality assessment of provisions are in compliance with global standards.
- Propose realistic recommendations to project competitive research assessment in the country.

Historical Background and Literature on HE in Sierra Leone

Historically, Sierra Leone once classed as the Athens of Africa (due to its curriculum focus on classic subjects like Greek and Latin), is still reminisced as a country where education in the African sub-region was sought by prominent people all around the West African English speaking nations (Paracka, 2002: 1); a reflection of the long memory of quality education that was once prevailed in the country as stated thus:

"Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown, was once an attractive centre of learning – the Athens of West Africa. There was a rich diversity of over a hundred ethnic groups, having constituted the home of liberated Africans during the abolition of the slave trade. Missionary scholars and linguists laid the foundation for the study of the three major languages of modern Nigeria – Yuroba, Ibo and Hausa. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars from Freetown produced over sixty books in and on eight African languages, with more than half of them written by students of Bay College. The late twentieth century would be a very different story, however. By the time the 11-year civil war ended in 2002, Sierra Leone's education sector had severely deteriorated – more than 60 per cent of the country's educational infrastructure had been destroyed – and many teachers and academics had fled during the hostilities. Rehabilitation of the sector was therefore a huge challenge for the government, as well as persuading professionals to return to the country (Redwood-Sawyers, 2011)".

The history of education dates back as early as in the 18th Century; incorporating the establishment of missionary education between 1816-1876 (part of the history of present day Fourah Bay College [FBC] administration formed in 1827 [USL, n/d]), the 'colonial education' marked by the period 1876-1938, and the 'development education' marked by the period 1938 - 2001 (Paracka, *ibid*). Present day FBC, the oldest institution of higher learning in Sierra Leone, and a constituent of the University of Sierra Leone, was borne out of the philanthropic minds of British missionaries (the 'Church Missionary Society [CMS]), also established the first recognised school in the country, the CMS Grammar School, now privately managed and popularly known by the name of the "Sierra Leone Grammar School [Williams, 1961]).

The college recruited students from all around the country, and particularly those from other English speaking West African states (Gambia, Ghana and Nigeria); it sought affiliation with the University of Durham in 1876 (for the confinement of all degree and certificate courses), also a Christian institution founded on the mission of promoting good education to all (Cheetham, 1966). The establishment of FBC as an institution for higher education was a very good move as it created scope for the establishment of African studies curriculum, an opportunity for repatriated slaves to learn more about their African route; a movement well supported by black returnees like William J. Davis (a school master of both the Methodist Boy High School and the WAM Collegiate School, who later changed his name to Orishatukeh Faduma to reflect his African environment), Edward Blyden, Ajai Crowther and Africanus Horton (Paracka, 2002).

The development education era (1938 - 2002) is marked by a new wave of thinking in moving the education system to take account of the inclusivity of a multi-ethnic nation, with over sixteen different languages spoken; as explained by Paracka (2002), it is a connotation synonymous to the concept of '*under-development*'. This era witnessed great achievements in the expansion of faculties within FBC, and most importantly, the creation of constituent colleges under the umbrella of USL (FBC, Njala University College, Institute of Public Administration and Management [IPAM] and College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences [COHMAS], and also institutes [Institute of Adult Education Education and Extra-Mural Studies, through which the then Milton Margai Teachers College [MMTC] was mandated to

award certificates for teacher training education, Institute of Population Studies, Institute of Library and Archive Studies and Mass Communications, African Studies Institute and the Institute of Marine Biology and Oceanography) within the umbrella of the University of Sierra Leone.

A planned introduction of the university acts (1967) of Sierra Leone, also within the development era witnessed an independent degree and certificate conferring institution on the 1st September 1966; an extension of the 1972 acts of Parliament also lead to the creation of an independent umbrella institutions (FBC, Njala, IPAM and Institute of Education), and later in 1988 COHMAS under the support of the Nigerian government and the World Health Organisation (USL, n/d). It was expected that the expansion would have resulted in a rationale for economic expansion with engagement of the university with the public (government establishments and in non-governmental organisations). In a bid to meeting its wider education commitment to the nation, the country was receipt of financial aid, and according to evidence (Kargbo, 1961), it shows that between 1961 - 71, a total of \$155million, accounting for a total cumulative 34% of all revenues received by the university, particularly from the USAID (\$4.5 million of this was assigned to the University of Illinois/Njala University College [NUC] project between 1963 and 1973).

Global occurrences during the development era (e.g., World War II and successive internal political disturbances), created serious problems to the stability of the Sierra Leone economy, and more so the inadequacy in providing funds to meet an expansion in the capacity of the university to cater for the sustainable development needs of constituent institutions (Paracka, 2002). Post-war resettlement in Sierra Leone saw massive diversion of the education system beyond the dominance of 'FBC and the then Njala University College', with expansion of the university 2005 acts, thereby resulting in the creation of the present day Njala University, Polytechnics (e.g., MMCET, Eastern Polytechnic, etc.), National, Council for Technical Vocational, and other Academic Awards (NCTVA), and more recently, the University of Makeni (UNIMAK), a privately own institution first established as Fatima Institute in 2005, and then upgraded to a university status in 2009 (Guerrero, 2014). The lasting dilapidated legacy left by a decade of civil war also accounted for difficulties faced in the country's HTEI to make competitive moved towards internalised internal assessment system to promote research and development work by respective universities; a critique also highlighted in Guerrero's (2014) article titled, '*Higher Education Environment, an Overview*'.

Emergence of new university system

The University Amendment Act 2014 also made provision for smaller institutions around the country to be absorbed by autonomous HETIs as shown below:

- (1) the Magburaka University College incorporating the Islamic College, Magburaka and the Government Technical Institute, Magburaka;
- (2) the Makeni University College incorporating the Makeni Polytechnic and Teko Veterinary Institute; and
- (3) the Port Loko University College (Government of Sierra Leone [GOSL], 2014).

On a positive note, the emergence of the above new HETIs establishments and particularly the Amendment Acts 2014 can be viewed as a move in the right direction, which enables regional towns in the country to access institutions of higher education, more so, promising youngsters needing to improve their future economic aspirations. With the current state of the economy (epitomised by low economic growth and high unemployment rate [Paracka, 2002 and Guerrero, 2014]), such expansion is likely to create short term problems through the over-supply of graduates in the labour market, which if not addressed, is also likely to pose further risks like social problems akin to young people, for example, thuggery and family unrest.

Sierra Leone being a free market economy is setting the pace for high scope of competition within its education system, more so through the encouragement of independent / privately established universities / higher education establishments. UNIMAK, one of the newest of emerging institutions in the country is setting itself as a model of good administration through the dedicated work of the abled Vice Chancellor (Prof. Joseph Turay); courses offered reflects good examples of the institution's vision to reach out to the community through research and consultancy undertakings (UNIMAK, n/d). Personal encounter with the Vice Chancellor also demonstrate such efforts in terms of the need to make adequate use of scarce resources to project the image of the university in the and country and beyond; such vision as expressed in the 'Value and Vision' statements is demonstrated on the leadership's efforts to liaise with external organisations to participate in exchange programmes and more encouraging, is the efforts made to collaborate with high profile NGOs in the country to compete for research and consultancy related tasks. The institution is highly acclaimed for its efforts to make judicious use of its limited financial resources to manage the administration (one of the only institution that is making the way towards self-sustenance), without government intervention or financial subsidy (UNIMAK, n/d).

The ambition for a technology style university establishment in Magburaka is very welcomed, but similar vision of self-sustenance must be set as the focus of the institution's agenda, which can only be achieved through productive programmes / courses delivered by the institution, and paramount of it all, its focus on research and development. Institutional capacity of higher education institutions to make an impact in the country and most importantly, projecting research and development work remains a core issue (Guerrero, 2014: 11); Njala University seemed to be taking a lead in this area as evidenced in the institution's presence for independent research work undertaken by staff at the university (Researchgate, n/d).

The Research Methodology

Study area

The study area covers all locations across the country where HTEIs are located, with emphasis placed on the three established universities in the country. University of Sierra Leone (incorporating FBC the oldest of all, IPAM and COHMAS)¹, the first established higher education institution in the country, and then followed by the then Njala University College, established to serve its purpose in leading the country through a process of self-sufficiency in food production, given its speciality in agricultural education (now established as an autonomous university establishment [Njala University²], under the university amendment Act of 2005). The newest of the universities is the University of Makeni (UNIMAK³), the only private university in the country. There are other HTEIs in the country but data provided for analytical discourse only reflect that of Njala and the University of Sierra Leone.

¹ All three institutions forming the University of Sierra Leone (USL) are located in the Western Area of the capital city, Freetown.

² The university has spread and with locations in Freetown, Southern region of the country. The university main location is still at Njala which is in the south of the country, but also have campuses in Bo town and Kenema.

³ A privately established university with very strong religious ties with the catholic mission in Italy. The university has two major sites, with its main head office at the Fatima College Campus and a second site at Yoni town, hosting one of the best scientific laboratory in the African sub-region as on account of devoting attention to scientific research in the wake of the Ebola epidemic which crippled the country's entire fabrics during the period 2014-15.

Design of the study

The study made use of secondary quantitative data from Google Scholar Analytics (WEBOMETRICS), and supported by a critical discourse analysis of the state of HTEIs situation in the present day in comparison to the African / Global league table outlook. There is a lack of record keeping information provided by the TEC (HTEI watch-dog), due to ongoing problems in the country with information analysis.

Study population and sampling

The population on which this study is based covers two of the three universities, mainly their positions in the African and World ranking results on research output. UNIMAK is not currently featured, and this is possibly due to insufficient data as a result of its recent emergence in the database of established universities in the country.

Instrument, data collection process and analysis

Instrumentation for this study is based on qualitative interpretation / critical discourse analysis of secondary quantitative WEBOMETRICS data pertaining to research output from the main established institutions in the country. 'Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)' of secondary data provided will assist in providing the way forward, through a new wave of thinking that leads to a sustainable pathway for HTEIs in the country (Van Dijk, 1993), and which up till recently relies totally on government funding for their sustenance.

Critical Discourse Analysis: Research and Teaching/Learning Data



This section is aimed at addressing one of the key objectives of the study (objectives two), more so a critical appraisal of the HETI performance in the country in comparison to the regional / global output for universities (Table 1 and Table 2). The tables provided below are a clear manifestation of the deteriorating situation of the current state of higher education position in the league table pertaining research and development. The table is based on Webometrics record of university research profile through Google Scholar Citations (Webometrics, n/d).



This is indicative of contribution towards research provision associated with individual universities; the Webometrics result shows a better ranking for University of Sierra Leone when compared to that of Njala University (both in Africa general and the Sub-region). On the whole, the result is disappointing for both universities, which is an indication of the questionable role played by TEC in promoting research in the country. Other similar global ranking data (e.g., QS World Ranking) also manifest similar poor outcomes about the situation of Sierra Leone's research ranking. The high level dependence of higher education institutions on government support is proving unsustainable given the current state of the cash strapped economy, whose reliance on natural resources to support public institutions is not forthcoming as expected due to global fluctuations in the country's mineral resources.



Result ranking for the two institutions (University of Sierra Leone and Njala University) in the Webometrics table is a real lesson for Sierra Leone, more so for institutions to start focusing attention on income generating and productive research activities (data for UNIMAK is missing due to insufficient record). Given the long establishments of the University of Sierra Leone, it is quite disappointing about the lack of real research capacity / outcomes manifested for the country; as evidenced by Guerrero (2014), the facilities for research in the University of Sierra Leone is quite disappointing with more or less no provision to promote substantive research as part of the country's long standing image as a former Athens of West Africa. On a positive note, Njala seemed to be making a good lead through their work in generating income for self-



sustenance as evidenced by Guerrero (2014) and research output by individual staff work (Researchgate, n/d).

Table 1, Table2: University Ranking, 2015

| Africa | | | | | | | | |
|---------|---------------|--|---|---|----------|--------|----------|------------|
| Ranking | World Ranking | University | Det. | Country | Presence | Impact | Openness | Excellence |
| 661 | 17794 | University of Sierra Leone |  |  | 22530 | 18776 | 19320 | 4318 |

| Sub-Saharan Africa | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|--|---|---|----------|--------|----------|------------|
| Ranking | World Ranking | University | Det. | Country | Presence | Impact | Openness | Excellence |
| 367 | 17794 | University of Sierra Leone |  |  | 22530 | 18776 | 19320 | 4318 |

| Africa | | | | | | | | |
|---------|---------------|---|---|---|----------|--------|----------|------------|
| Ranking | World Ranking | University | Det. | Country | Presence | Impact | Openness | Excellence |
| 887 | 19826 | Njala University Sierra Leone |  |  | 17757 | 21064 | 17700 | 4898 |

| Sub-Saharan Africa | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------|---|---|---|----------|--------|----------|------------|
| Ranking | World Ranking | University | Det. | Country | Presence | Impact | Openness | Excellence |
| 510 | 19826 | Njala University Sierra Leone |  |  | 17757 | 21064 | 17700 | 4898 |

Source: Webometrics (n/d)

Assessment of TEC’s role in promoting competitiveness

The TEC is mandated to provide strategic role in promoting strong commitment towards championing research and development at each of the respective institutions; one way in which this can be achieved is through rigorous internal QIA system to foster high quality teaching / learning, and research. An in-country model of competitive assessment of research is very essential, but the current system does not appear to show any lead in this direction (there seemed to be very little going on at TEC to promote quality assurance system to facilitate research and teaching). As outlined in Braima et al (2015) Post-2015 test data, it is quite evident that, for sustainable growth to take place, a system must demonstrate evidence of sound education system, with capability of reliable data to help people make informed judgement

about the present and future; such system as suggested by Jackson (2015) may include the installation of an efficient information system capable of allowing people to access data anywhere and at any time.

Based on the reality of TEC's mandate, there seemed to a real lack of corporate social responsibility on the authority's part to ensure its strategic responsibility in managing quality of teaching, learning and research output is addressed; TEC's oversight duty must be able to protect stakeholders, for example, students (for whom teaching and learning should be the centre of HETIs priorities, and backed by the opportunity to encourage active engagement in research), the community (which in this case, may involve active participation by individual universities to collaborate with society at large through school network schemes in motivating aspirations), and also 'active links with corporate organisations / NGOs / the Public Sector to facilitate the application of research to generate revenues (see Figure 1); part of scholars thinking concerning education-for-sustainability (Palmer, 1998, also in Grecu and Ipina, 2015)'.

Proposed Model for Enhancing Competitiveness University System

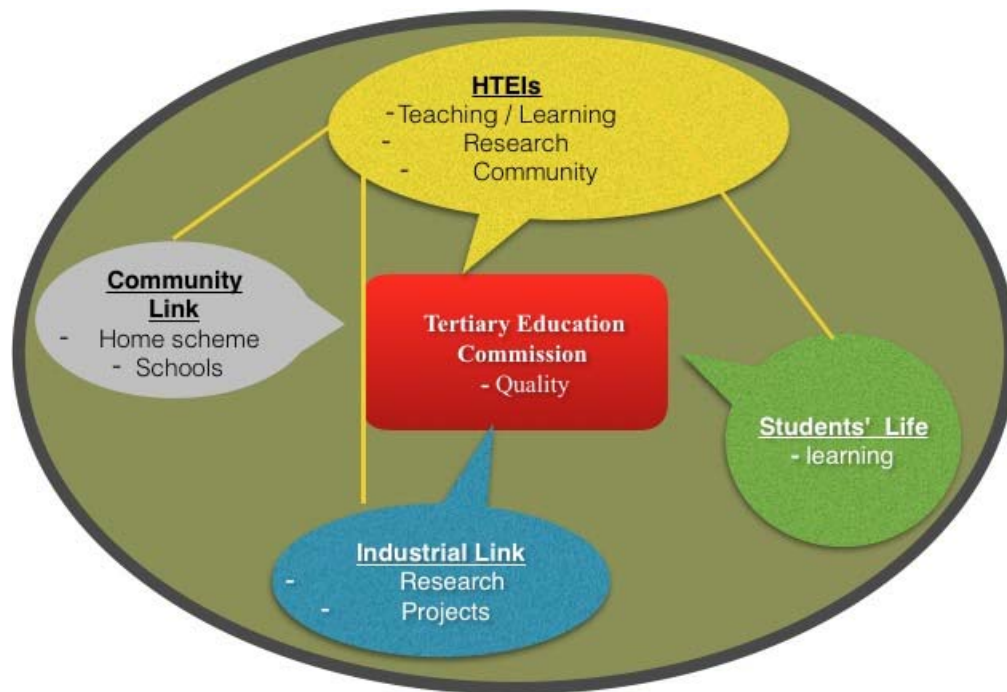


Fig. 1. Model of Sustainable HETI in Sierra Leone

Source: developed by the author

The figure above shows evidence of a model for sustainable growth for higher education establishments in Sierra Leone. Given the poor performance of HETI in Sierra Leone, the proposed model is developed on the premise that it will help foster high level collaboration between TEC and HETIs in the country. The central focus of TEC, with an overarching role of facilitating quality assurance systems for individual institutions, is to demonstrate good practice when it comes to teaching, learning and research. According to a similar research produced by Grecu and Ipina (2015: 7), it is well noted that a sustainable institution should be able to work closely with core stakeholders, for example, students and also, the wider community and organisations, both corporate and public.

Based on the proposed model, each HETIs should set up its own quality assurance and monitoring system to ensure quality is prioritise. This means that evaluation report for students (possibly at the end of every semester) will provide the means for students to express their views on quality of teaching and learning. In this regard, individual universities / Higher education Learning institutions should be assigned a dedicated directorate (Dean of Students Affairs) responsible for publicising analysed results about students voices, and the publication of outcomes through suitable medium (for example, students letter / website).

On a similar note, engagement with the *wider community* must be made an essential part of HETIs outreach vision; through this, institutions will likely be able to express high level of commitment towards corporate social responsibility, which can involve activities like '*university taster-day seasons for secondary schools*', the provision of support to embrace good teaching and learning (for both primary and secondary schools) so as to empower students who may not have considered university an option due to poverty. In this case, the TEC must also ensure that tuition fees charged to students should be used to champion '*designated scholarship funds*' under the umbrella of '*Aim Higher*' as a way of promoting wider participation agenda to encourage pupils from poorer backgrounds to enter higher education (a corporate social responsibility agenda).

In a 21st century world, and more so given the cash strapped situation of the government (resulting on the impact of global economic down-turn), it is essential that higher education institutions in Sierra Leone develop a strategic plan to encourage greater participation with corporate organisations, and also the Public Sector and NGOs operating in the country to spearhead active research and development activities; this will help institutions to start thinking about ways of generating income without heavy reliance on a 100% funding from the government as the only way forward for institutions to manage their day-to-day activities (sustainable growth agenda).

The TEC should set itself an agenda / timeframe (possibly between 2 to 4 years) for which every institutions within HETIs can be inspected as a way of ensuring '*value-for-money (VFM)*' invested from the public coffers are determined and reported back to the public through published reports. This will help aspiring students make informed decisions about choices / criteria for courses to embark on, and a preference for their preferred institution to pursue higher studies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The process of promoting sustainable development / growth (now part of the global university agenda [van Weenen, 2000]), particularly for HETIs in Sierra Leone, spearheaded by TEC (watch-dog) is not an easy process, especially when it involve effecting '*CHANGE*'; for HETIs' in Sierra Leone to improve their profile at both global and regional league tables, change is certainly an inevitable component the vision for sustainable growth. How this is executed will depend on an individual institution's capacity and strategic planning systems to assist with the process.

There needs to be a complete overhaul of the operational activities in Sierra Leone, with a forward thinking approach to enhancing competitiveness at higher education level, and one way in which this can happen is through the adoption of a sustainable growth plan (reference to Figure 1), aimed at helping institutions embrace teaching, learning and research at the centre of their strategic plan (Posch, 1991). Embracing all of these (reference to Figure 1) comes with an increase scope and opportunity to improve quality of student enrolment (both at national and international level), and the attraction of funding opportunities for research.

On the basis of the analytical discourses provided throughout this article, it is worth directing attention towards some realistic recommendations that is likely to help steer higher education

thinking in Sierra Leone, more so, towards a sustainable development and growth approach, particularly in the current 21st century and beyond:

- The development of a strategic plan to encourage a robust and timely quality assessment review of all HETIs in the country (this should take the form of arrangement for all faculties / schools to be assessed on the basis of quality in teaching, learning and research capability (*a role for TEC*)).
- The incorporation of annually ‘*self-assessment reporting*’ system by all HETIs so as to ensure progress is made in terms of planning the way forward in making all universities become competitive, both at national and global level (*role for HETIs*).
- Initiate a programme for ‘*community engagement*’; this should involve plans on how HETIs can work with community groups such as schools (primary and secondary), and their commitment towards raising *aim higher* plans for aspiring youngsters intending to progress through higher education establishments (*role for HETIs*).
- Oversight committees to be set up by TEC to ensure issues are dealt with in relation to quality improvement plans prepared by individual HETIs.
- Independent review board to be set up by TEC to monitor individual HETIs in relation to their plans for promoting research and development, through engagement with local and international organisations, and where necessary, establishing collaborative research partnership with HETIs, both in Sierra Leone and oversees (this may include regional HETIs in Africa, Europe, the USA and many more).
- Raising students voices in relation to their perception of quality of teaching / learning, and where necessary, the establishment of a medium for reporting concerns raised by individual institutions.
- Raise HETIs profile through easy access to data for students to enhance their learning opportunities at individual institutions; in this situation, TEC can act as a ‘*HUB*’ for promoting activities involving teaching, learning and research undertaken by individual HETI. This could also lead to the beginning of a centralised type of HETIs application process for students channelled via the TEC so to make sure a robust application process is done for recruiting students on merit basis (similar to they of the UK UCAS application).

Acknowledgement

At this juncture, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to colleagues for their overt expression of concerns with regard to HETIs present unsustainable approach towards competitiveness in the country, and more importantly, airing out their views on their perception of the future for a sustainable pathway of growth in the country.

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