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HIGHER EDUCATION REPORT SIERRA LEONE

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Abstract

Sierra Leone has made a remarkable recovery since the end of the war in January 2002. Increased security, political stability, sustained economic growth, and effective restoration of public services, including education are results of this process. However, the economy is dominated by agriculture and limited by small-scale market. Youth unemployment persists and many young adults who had neglected education, or were unable to continue because they simply could not afford to pay their fees, remain unemployed.

Over the last four years, the government of President Julius Maada Bio has responded robustly by adopting Human capital development as its flagship program. This allows for a dual focus policy, subdividing the Ministry of Education into two: Ministry of Basic and Senior School; Ministry of Technical and Higher Education.

The government through the Ministry of Basic and Senior School commenced a Free Quality School Education program barely months after assuming office in 2019. This program offers access to every child and caters for books, and a school feeding program for schools in the most vulnerable communities.

At the technical and higher education level, the government continues to promote access to tertiary and vocational education through appropriate policies and legislation as well as skills development for the advancement of education in Sierra Leone. These policies ultimately guarantee the provision of quality education for national development and global competitiveness.

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Acronyms

MMCET	-	Milton Margai College of Education and Technology
USL	-	University of Sierra Leone
ETU	-	Eastern Technical University
NPSE	-	National Primary School Examination
WASSCE	-	West African Secondary School Certificate Examination
MoF	-	Ministry of Finance
WAEC	-	West African Examinations Council
FQSE	-	Free Quality School Education
HEIs	-	Higher Education Institutions
STEAM	-	Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture and Mathematics
AQHEd-SL	-	
BMAPS	-	Benchmark Minimum Academic and Professional Standards
NQF	-	National Qualification Framework
TVET	-	Technical Vocational Education Training
LMS	-	Learning Management Systems
FQSE	-	Free Quality School Education

CURRENT SITUATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education in Sierra Leone was restructured in 2005, by the Universities Act of 2005, which provides for the establishment of private universities. The Ministry is keen to provide the enabling environment to build the capacity of individuals with the relevant knowledge and skills to meet the social and economic needs of families, communities and the society, building on the rich history of our educational institutions that have nurtured intellectuals, whose contribution have been remarkable. As a Ministry providing oversight to all higher educational institution, we strive for excellence, professionalism and integrity in all we do.

The Ministry continues to offer opportunities for students to access institutions of higher learning through a government Grant-in-Aid and has launched a students' Loan Scheme. We offer the platform for students to access international scholarships in our website, followed by a rigorous and transparent screening process. Our nation has great potential to explore in the field of science and technology with a youthful population with the zest to break new grounds. We are hopeful, we can source investment to open opportunities for our growing population. We are committed to increase enrollment and retention in the technical and vocational institutions by improving existing structures and developing new ones. We are prepared to transform the middle level man-power as a powerhouse for entrepreneurs to move our nation forward. Together with our international friends and local as stakeholders in the higher education sector, we can develop a system to compete and excel in the international platform for opportunities to transform our world.

Legal and institutional framework of higher education

The Milton Margai College of Education and Technology and the Eastern Polytechnic were established as Polytechnics in 2001 by an Act of Parliament. The Milton Margai College of Education, the Freetown Technical Institute and the Hotel Tourism Training Institute merged as one educational Institution, resulting in the establishment of three campuses (Goderich Campus, Congo Cross Campus and Brookfield's Campus). The MMCET Polytechnic offered Certificate, Diploma, Higher National Diploma and Higher Teachers Certificate and Degree programs. MMCET had five faculties namely: Faculty of Education, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Business and Management Studies, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences and Faculty of Hotel, Tourism and Nutritional Sciences. The Polytechnic has a total of twenty-seven (27) Departments across the campuses.

On the 8th of July, 2021, "The University Act, 2021" passed into law with unanimity and led to the transformation of both the Milton Margai College of Education and Technology and Eastern Polytechnic to the Milton Margai Technical University and the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone respectively.

The Eastern Technical University (ETU) of Sierra Leone is a multi-campus institution, currently located in Kenema (Kenema District), Bunumbu (Kailahun District) and Woama (Kono District). With 212 faculties, nearly 9,000 students and 640 programs, the ETU of Sierra Leone offers access to certificates, diploma and degrees programs online, distance learning and flexible on-campus study. The courses offered at ETU come with a strong focus on employability and job creation— many of which are accredited by professional bodies.

Sierra Leone has made a remarkable recovery since the end of the war in January 2002. Increased security, political stability, sustained economic growth, and effective restoration of public services, including education are results of this process. However, the economy is dominated by agriculture and limited by a small market. Youth unemployment persists and many young people had neglected education, or were unable to continue because they simply could not afford to pay their fees.

Over the last four years, (since assuming power in 2018) the government of President Julius Maada Bio has responded robustly: it had adopted Human capital development as its flagship program. This allows for a dual focus policy, which established a Ministry of Basic and Senior School and a Ministry of Technical and Higher Education.

The government, through the Ministry of Basic and Senior School, commenced a Free Quality School Education program barely months after assuming office in 2019. This program offers access to every child and caters for books, pays examination fees for the National Primary School Examination (NPSE), Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) and the West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), as well as finance the School Feeding program for schools in the most vulnerable communities.

At the technical and higher education level, the government continues to promote access to tertiary and vocational education through appropriate policies and legislation, as well as skills development for the advancement of education in Sierra Leone. These policies ultimately guarantee the provision of quality education for national development and global competitiveness.

2. Historical enrolments and graduation rates (???)

Any Other Relevant Sub Heading

- **IMPROVING ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION**

The successes of the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme have triggered a spike in the demand for tertiary education in Sierra Leone. Meanwhile, public expenditure on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) remains relatively fixed at a modest average of about USD 25 M over the past decade.

Figure 1: Annual expenditure on higher education ('000 USD) compared to the number of pupils taking the West African Senior Secondary School Examinations (finishing Senior Secondary School). Source: Adapted from data obtained from Ministry of Finance (MoF) and West African Examinations Council (WAEC).

Sierra Leone continues to grapple with challenges of limited access to HE financing and gender inequity/disproportionate participation of female students in science, technology, engineering, agriculture and mathematics (STEAM) disciplines.

By 2019 access rate at the TE level was 1,654 per 100,000 inhabitants (with 48% females and 81% enrolled in HEIs). Government supports access higher education through the grant-

in-aid programs, which caters for students enrolled in priority disciplines, mainly science, technology, engineering, agriculture and mathematics (STEAM) enrolled in 80 tertiary education institutions in the country (i.e., 11 universities, 10 polytechnics and 59 colleges). Female students enrolled in STEAM related programs have been given priority.

A Student Loan Scheme has also recently been introduced to fund additional access.

An online Learning Management Systems (LMS) developed by the Ministry is being piloted at 8 TEIs. Originally motivated by the need to circumvent COVID-19 restrictions, the LMS has shown immense potential for enhancing the delivery effectiveness of TEIs in general and while making while expanding the access opportunities. Fortunately, appropriate policies have been developed to guide the governance and management of online education by TEIs, although these require further strengthening and aligned to the contemporary challenges of online education.

Sierra Leone's National Innovation and Digital Strategy is the basis for digital transformation in Sierra Leone. Fiber optic connections are currently available at all HEIs. However, there is limited infrastructure to support digital transformation at TEIs the staff and students of HEIs do not enjoy the full benefits of broadband Internet connectivity. These limitations may have significant impact on the success of digital innovation at HEIs.

ENHANCING QUALITY

Amidst their rising numbers over the years TEIs in Sierra Leone continues to face quality-related challenges, especially with respect to effective monitoring of their academic activities. This is often attributed to the surge in access demand amidst weak staff profiles and an ad-hoc approach to quality management. In this regard, higher education institutions are in the process of building their internal quality management infrastructure to support routine monitoring, regulatory compliance and continuous institutional improvement.

Seven HEI benefitted from pilot interventions related to quality enhancement over the past three to four years. These interventions took the form of active stakeholder engagement activities to inform curricula re-design, curricular reforms and revisions, pedagogical training for lecturers, drafting of a national qualifications framework and the training of 34 Quality Assurance Officers across 8 higher education institutions at postgraduate diploma level. Steps are currently being taken by these institutions to deploy functional internal QA units to take over routine quality management responsibilities and popularize the quality culture within these institutions and beyond. Other institutions are expected to subsequently benefit from the experiences accruing from the pilot activities.

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Challenge 1: HEIs in Sierra Leone are frequently being challenged to make their academic programmes more germane to the current job market demands. In a pilot attempt to address this challenge, the AQHEd-SL project piloted outcome-based curricular reform activities in 8 HEIs leading to the development and testing of curriculum review protocols in health-, management-, STEM- and Agriculture-related programmes and courses. Staff of 8 TEIs received various trainings and participated in the rubrics of stakeholder engagement and curriculum realignment processes. A total of 295 academic courses have

been redesigned across 8 HEIs and 475 lecturers have received training in pedagogy; covering topics on assessment of learning outcomes, gender sensitive pedagogy and critical thinking. Ongoing work towards national curriculum development/review framework will put all the above lessons, experiences and perspectives into a clearly defined curricular structure that dynamically deals with the age-old challenge of relevance of academic programmes of HEIs to the job market. While these developments have laid the foundation to transform and galvanize collaboration among HEIs in Sierra Leone, the ultimate goal of integrating and systematizing these innovations and turn them into popular practices across the country are still far out.

The identification and recognition of standard learning outcomes for programmes in similar fields of study are essential for mobility of students across institutions and national boundaries through credit transfer and standardization of qualifications. The credits-based National Qualifications Framework (NQF) drafted separately for TVET and HE institutions have laid the foundation for a unified NQF for the TE system. A comprehensive NQF developed in sync with regional qualification frameworks will not only allow the quantification of volume of learning, accumulation of credits, recognition of prior learning and mobility of learners across in, it will also serve as a mechanism to promote inclusivity through non-formal mobility pathways. A prerequisite for implementing the NQF will be the development of discipline-specific Benchmark Minimum Academic and Professional Standards (BMAPS).

Challenge 2: There have been persistent complaints by HEIs for decades over cases over political interference affecting outputs and corresponding requests for greater autonomy to enhance the performances of HEIs. The President has responded to this cry by relinquishing the position of Chancellorship of all public Universities under the new Universities Act of 2021, making way for the appointment of other citizens to serve in that capacity. However, this important legislation comes amidst f compliance concerns expressed by regulatory authorities. Plans are therefore under way to strengthen the regulatory frameworks and operational capacity to ensure that the Chancellors are adequately supported.

Towards 2030 and beyond; Recommendations for the Future

- Increase partnership between Universities and Local Communities
- Improve the research ecosystem so universities can actually expand the scope of knowledge base.
- More importantly universities should indigenise curricular so that the program are both demand driven.

