

CHALLENGES OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN LIBERIA AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Mory D.A Sumaworo, B.A in Law, MCL, PhD Candidate in Comparative Laws

Ahmad Ibrahim School of Laws, IIUM, Malaysia
President of the Heritage Schools Union in Liberia

Abstract

Liberia as a post- conflict zone faces lots of challenges, but atop of which is preparing reliable and productive human capital through which abundant natural resources that it has can be beneficial and help to change its status of underdevelopment. Further, among negative aftermaths of the 14 years of Civil Wars (1989-2003) in Liberia, is massive migration of professionals and qualified teachers and universities lecturers to the western world mainly the United States of America. Thus, this migration left an adverse effect on pre-university studies in Liberia. As a result, tertiary education has been also dangerously affected. Despite the international and national efforts to revive and rejuvenate educational sector in Liberia, the situation seems to be facing multiple challenges, especially the higher education. Besides, the weakness in Liberian education system has led the President herself, a Noble Price laureate, her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Serleaf to describe Liberia education as a mess. Moreover, poor implementation of educational policies, ill - financial supports for institutions of higher learning, poor educational infrastructures, and rampant child labour etc., are some of major things that constitute challenges to higher education in Liberia. Nonetheless, there have been lots of attempts and practical endeavors to reform and refine pre-university school system in Liberia. Subsequently, sophisticate tertiary ones for development and building productive human capitals by the government and her local and international partners, such as The United States International Aid (USAID), The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the African Development Bank, A.S Charitable Society, (a local NGO) Catholic Schools, Methodist Schools (local school systems) and others. Therefore, this article aims at looking at challenges facing tertiary education in Liberia and how could they be mitigated and minimized so that the system should be the best after being the mess.

Keywords: Liberia education system, Tertiary education, pre-university, education policy

Introduction

Africa as a whole which Liberia forms a part, has made noticeable progress in educational sector since last decade, yet there are still many challenges to be handled and mitigated as observed by the UNISCO (United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in its World Conference on higher education in 1998 (Goolam, 2011)

Meanwhile, sound higher education is a gateway of developing sound and productive human resources for any given nation. If any loophole happens to be found in tertiary education system that will definitely lead to adverse effects on the nation's productivity as a result its economy will negatively be affected. This is a 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 ones. Furthermore, while this tiny West African nation trying to reform all its sectors especially education, the Ebola Virus hit the country and set as one of its biggest challenges. Further, in 2013, 25000 students sat for entrance exam to the University of Liberia the biggest state –run university, but sadly 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) while Minister of Education Mrs. Etmonia David-Tarpeh acknowledges the setback in Liberia education system but raises a doubt about the possibility for 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). What this argument between the State own university and the Ministry of Education suggests is, there is a problem in the pre-university education in the country, which outcome leads to this massive failure of students in the entrance exam for university enrollment.

Besides, the reason behind this might be unavailability of vacant seats at the State own University, which implies involvement of 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 public university will drastically reduce and rate of student 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 higher education in Liberia characterized in poor infrastructures especially for science related disciplines. 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 students are hardly found in the country.

Significance of Higher Education for Liberia post-war development

In order to really understand the gravity of damage tertiary education suffers when it is not on the right course, it is crucial to outline some significance that higher education has on development of any country and more specifically in fragile states like Liberia. Higher education is a driven tool to sound economic stability, sustainable peace, social development, scientific innovation and technological advancement (**Yizengaw**, 2008). All these are highly needed and demanded in Liberia as strategies to make her graduate from its current economic, social, and security situations to what is anticipated by all well-meaning Liberians, the International Community and other development partners.

Thus, quality higher education will certainly attract Foreign Direct Investors (FDI) flow in the country with their huge capitals and massive career opportunities as they would be less reliant on bringing with them expatriates which costs companies lots of money some time in foreign country. Therefore, below are some important benefits of higher education:

Economic benefit

This aspect of higher education can be seen in different angles; it can increase employment opportunities, facilitate salary increment; bring about greater productivity and national development in all domains (**Yizengaw**, 2008). The economic benefit of tertiary education in Liberia is nowadays vividly seen as some multinational company might want to employ Liberians at key positions with luxurious salary, but because of lack of qualified Liberian, the job might likely go to non-Liberian. I had the meeting with the Director of Dispute Settlement at the Ministry of Labour Mr. Nathaniel Dickerson, he told me during our discussion that a company approached them for assistance of having a Liberia geologist to occupy a post , but unfortunately they were not able to meet qualified target, thus job went to non-Liberia with all its benefits.

Social and Political Benefits

Higher education gives greater chance to the people to improve their lives the lives of their families as it secures job opportunity for them and furnish them with brilliant ideals to create jobs for others by establishing new businesses and institutions. Politically on the other hand, tertiary education

sophisticates the public with analytical tools to 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 of tertiary education, professionalism and reliability on its human capital for national development and encouraging investors to do business with that country can be highly sought. Further, with sound and quality higher education the nation can secure and have well - qualified medical doctors, engineers, politicians, economists, and critical thinkers. Obviously, all these are very important components in driving any development agenda, economic recovery, and socio-political reforms. Besides, capacity building in Liberia is one of the government priorities as the nation still striving to produce engineers, medical doctors, and other science oriented experts; this is due to the fact that the tertiary education has been over the years dominated by students of art colleges because of poor equipment and facility needed in science colleges.

Scientific benefit

Institutes of higher learning are not only designed for traditional teaching by delivering lectures to students. Rather, they are the sources of technological innovations and creativity in science and other disciplines. Thus, those innovations and researches are of utmost importance in solving lots of problems in the country and in the world at large.

Support other levels of education

Pre-university study is very crucial; it largely depends on dividends of tertiary institutions. With 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 degrees. However, in Liberia context, the scenario is quite different as most of the secondary and high schools are being taught by those with the same qualifications (High school Diplomas). At the university level, majority of lecturers at most of the tertiary institutions in Liberia are university degree holders. So, in this kind of situation large percentage of universities products would definitely be substandard as a result other levels of education can be affected.

Challenges of Higher education in Liberia

Admittedly, Liberia is not far different from most of its counterparts in the African continent in terms of having faced multiple challenges of tertiary institutions, notwithstanding massive educational reform 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. Subsequently, produces better citizens, yet history shows clearly the political and economic nature of the forces that lead to stampede in reforms in many African countries such as Liberia (Adamu n.a). Thus, this is happening because of existence of some setbacks in higher educational system, they could be social, financial, academic, political and other factors like security condition especially when Liberia engaged in 14 years of Civil Wars that badly affected school- going children and crippled parents and teachers alike. However, this aspect of the article will look at some of these challenges in detail as discussed below:

Governance and leadership Challenge:

Higher institutes of learning are just like states by themselves, they can be better places to live had they being managed properly and led professionally. 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 Liberian tertiary institutes including the University of Liberia – the State - owned University- are being run by substandard manner which always fuel tensions between central administrations and faculty members on one hand and between the central administration and students on the other hand. Besides, these 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 the world.

Moreover, another related factor to this challenge in Liberia's universities and colleges is lack of innovation in leadership. That is; most of

decision making personals have been in the system for years as a result they always prefer running institutions the way they were managed thirty or more years back.

Lack of sufficient funding

Running a tertiary education requires sufficient funding and proper financial support in order to meet day- to- day targets and the overall objectives of the institution, atop which is producing quality and 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 in different disciplines. Nevertheless, when financial support for universities - either because 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 achieve the target – is so weak and insufficient then the overall objectives of the institutions will definitely be affected.

Besides, this is the case in Liberia universities and colleges as they struggle to compete with other universities in the world because of financial constrain which lead 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 can be comprised. I meet couple of universities students and asked about some challenges they face from their lecturer and professors, they answer of almost 75% was “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 can assign some of their former students whom to them are capable to lecture on their behalf. Nevertheless, that is not the case because those former students don’t have even Master’s degree some of them even stay doing their first degree”

Shortage of faculty member

Students and faculty members are major components of any tertiary institution; the ratio between these two groups has to be well-balanced according to the best international standard----- referece). However, 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 Liberia context, the University of Liberia and other institutes of higher learning face this challenge.

Evidently, in the University of Liberia, some normal class room

accommodates more than 100 students at once with no adequate facilities like microphone or projectors. Just recently, in order to mitigate this problem, the University's administration decided to divide students into two groups; senior students have a month, then junior ones have another. However, with all these efforts and strategies the problem and challenges still exist.

Lack of research and innovation

Among the major objectives of any well- furnished tertiary institutions is to conduct research to solve existing problem or prevent the potential ones. Also, scientific innovation is of major concern of highly sophisticated universities and colleges in the world. However, in Liberian context, universities and colleges are still facing strong challenge for academic research and scientific innovations, there no ISI journals in the entire Republic, and lecturers are not so active in publishing articles; because of lack of proper founding for research in the universities. Further, because of lack of science laboratories and modern technology equipment in the tertiary institutions, the innovation is still unborn in Liberia.

Poor university infrastructure

Having said that academic outputs and scientific and technological innovations are among core aims for which tertiary institutions can be 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.

Nevertheless, Liberia higher education lacks almost of these requisites of quality production of qualified scientist and internationally reliable academicians in various disciplines. However, the blame does go to the entire system, never to those who found themselves in academia, because no matter how professor or lecturer is smart and courageous if the institution's facilities are not encouraging his/her output will not be compared with those who have them. I did interview with Mr. J. Agostinho Bioh, Law School's Library assistant at the University of Liberia and also post-graduate student with the same university. He said "major challenge we face here is lack of libraries and 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 extra effort to do what had to be done at high schools as a result it would affect other major target of the university.

Undeniably, this is the case in large of percentage of high schools graduates in Liberia as their performance in basic subjects such as Math, English, Chemistry and Physics is not satisfactory. Therefore, they admit to the universities which curriculum does not observe this challenge, the product (college graduates) can be very poor in job market, above that it gives serious problem to the university's administration because some student with 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 universities and colleges are based in Monrovia the capital city of Liberia. Though, recent development has shown opening some community colleges in other counties. But because of most of major activities especially commercial and administrative one have been centralized in Monrovia, students rarely prefer enrolling into those community colleges and Tubman University in Maryland (The second public university in Liberia) . Thus, this causes serious problem for universities and colleges in Monrovia in terms of congestion and overcrowdings in lectures' halls at the universities and colleges. Consequently, the study environment is unfriendly and students and lecturers outputs can be seriously affected.

Medical challenge

is pertinent to include medical as one of challenges that face tertiary education in Liberia. For instance, the Ebola virus outbreak has affected Liberia education as whole and university study in particular. The outbreak of virus led universities and colleges to be closed for almost two consecutive semesters which – no doubt – jeopardized the whole system. Even after Liberia 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.

Possible solution

Having admitted that there are challenges in Liberia higher education that do not dismiss the fact that they can't be handled or sorted out. Besides, with sound and implantable policies by the government and other development partners to reform and refine higher education in Liberia, most

of those challenges would be diminished. Thus, transformation premised on the best international practice would be achieved.

Drafting sound education reform policies

Governing educational institutions requires good policies that serve as a vehicle to reform and transform educational system from what it is to the better one. Liberian government has a quite number of policies and regulations related to education; however they have relatively been able to handle some problems. Nevertheless, there are still lots of challenges standing needed to be addressed by relevant policies that suit them. For instance, decentralization policy of higher education, capacity building project for lecturers to pursue their Master and Ph.D. in some high profile university in the United States, Europe, Asia, Canada, Japan etc. 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 newly appointed 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 people” (TBS, 9/06/2015)

Comprehensive and Market –Oriented Curriculum

Another strategy to minimize challenges that facing tertiary education in Liberia is to design study plans and curriculum that works alongside with modern reality and market. However, this will give strong background to the pre-university’ students before their enrollment into tertiary institutions. In other worlds, the curriculum in this context does not mean theoretical study structure on paper, rather it insinuates practical aspects, such as, establishing public private libraries and laboratories for practical training to be rendered for high school students. Further, this will change the trend of large percentage of students being admired and admitted into art causes over science colleges despite the nation in dire need of science college graduates to achieving its development agenda.

Also, compressive and market - oriented curriculum will gradually put Liberian universities on the list of top innovative university in Africa and the rest of the world as it will encourage faculty members to engage in scientific research and innovation for solving multiple problems; medical and technological problems in Liberia, Africa and our global village.

Sufficient Budget for Education

Education in general and higher education in particular requires sufficient financial supports to run its affairs; administration, research and innovation, upgrading facilities and infrastructures, social services and

others. All these are matter of money with strong commitment. However, most of universities in developing world in Africa including Liberia are in lack of adequate funding to meet the above stated targets. Thus, that creates and gives birth to multiple challenges associated with effectiveness of higher institutes of learning in Liberia. 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 budges 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 Word Bank, the African Development Bank get to be onboard to tackle this problem by providing financial assistance to colleges and universities as Liberia is now stragglng to invest in different domains with many competing priorities; infrastructure, security, education, etc.

Encouraging Private Sector Involvement in Tertiary Education

Current really suggests that most of the success stories of higher education in the world are indebted to effective public –private partnership 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) . Therefore, if PPP (public private partnership) is sophisticatedly established thus high profile private colleges and universities are opened either afresh or a branch of any other universities in advanced world especially the United States which is role model of Liberia socio-political and somehow educational system because of longstanding historical tie between the two countries.

Moreover, private sector engagement will increase enrollment rate to tertiary institutions as it would provide extra seats and lessen burden on public universities in Liberia. This strategy has really worked in many countries that were facing challenges that Liberia is now facing 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 is generally held to be the step that follows policy formulation and is viewed as ‘the process of carrying out a basic policy decision.’ (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1983,p. 143). However in most cases in Africa and in Liberia specifically lots of sound and intelligent educational policies are there, but the problem is lack of proper compliance and application of those policies into reality to meet its intended purposes.

Therefore, it is highly advisable to the government of Liberia to not only design strategies to improve tertiary education rather to have full control and oversight responsibility in order for them to be adequately implemented. Despite the government’s efforts to reduce literacy rate, but it seems not to yield satisfactory result because proper implementation of policies and laws contributing to meet this end. For instance, massive child labour on the streets of Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia is alarming during school’s hours. Therefore, these children will not have access to reading and writing as a result literacy rate will always be increasing.

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). Evidently, section 1.4 (c) reads that the law should strengthen scientific and technological learning as a basis for speedy industrialization and economic advancement” (Education Law: 2002) Nevertheless, since the passage of this law there have not been any well-equipped and sophisticated libraries and laboratories in the country especially at various universities and colleges. This implies improper implementation of this sound and development driven policy in Liberia.

Establishing strong international academic cooperation

Having recognized some setbacks in Liberia’s higher education institutions and challenges that the products of Liberian universities and colleges facing. Therefore, signing an academic cooperation and MoUs between Liberian institutes and their counterparts in advanced world in Europe, the United States and other parts of the globe would be among the best and efficient solutions to upgrade and standardize level of tertiary education in the country. As by doing so, the nation will be hosting highly qualified lecturers in different disciplines – especially in science and technology - to assist their fellow Liberian lecturers to produce market demanded graduates and development driven scholars.

Conclusion

Higher education is a backbone of sustainable development for any given geographic being. Therefore, in order for Liberia to really sustain what has achieved since its 14-year of Civil Wars ended in 2003 followed by democratic election, priority has to be put on research and innovation, to identify security and development risks in order to prevent them. Of course, sound productive research and innovations are among the tasks of universities and colleges. Thus, they have to be administered in a manner that they could be able to meet this target. Thought, there are multiple challenges standing that tertiary education faces in Liberia, but those can be simply be mitigated had proper and adequate policies being in place with proper implementation and evaluation schemes.

Besides, education sector is not just about subsidizing always, rather it is about series of activities and initiatives such as good governance and leadership, and considering other factors that might directly or indirectly affect education such as security, and health.

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