The Dilemma of Sierra Leone Universities

Turad Sennesie
Njala University, Sierra Leone
zomat2000@yahoo.com

Background

The origin of the University could be traced back to the 1200s when a German student decided to throw a party for some of his friends in his apartment. He sent his servant, a ten-year-old boy to get a jug of wine. The boy was given sour wine and when he complained; he was beaten by the bartender and some hangers and he was thrown into the street. The boy managed to reach his master and he made his complaint. The student and his friends went to the bar and beat the bartender and his boys and took home jugs filled with wine.

Upon the request of the barkeeper, the provost and his men went in search of the students. A pitched battle ensued and the provost and his men ended up killing five students including the German student. This irritated other students as well as the masters as they were equally molested by the actions of the provosts. The refusal of the chancellor to address the plight of the masters and students led them to organize themselves into a union or a *universitas* meaning “The University of the Masters and Students of Paris”.

A number of corporate rights, privileges and protection from the king were requested. When the king asked what they would do if he decided to say no, they replied with the famous words, *“Then we shall shake the dust of the streets of Paris from the hems of our gowns.”* In effect, they were threatening to leave and to do their teaching elsewhere. Their demands were addressed and the King didn’t lose revenue in terms of taxes. It is therefore evident that the origin of the university was solidly built on the foundation of correcting abnormalities and inconsistencies affecting society and the communities, hence paving the way for development. Therefore teaching and research is not the only core functions of the university but serve as a conduit for reshaping societal behavior while regarding rule of law as a major instrument for development. The situation in Paris at that point in time warranted the action of the lecturers and the students and there was a need for changes in the behavior of some state operatives. No ready-made model exists to guide these changes; they will require both creativity and the willingness to engage in thoughtful dialogue, both within and outside universities Judith Sutz, (2005). In all of these educational transformations is a necessity for national development and the union/university plays a pivotal role.

University and Development

Trumbach, Hartman and Lundberg believes the university can play a key role, not only in producing innovative research that can contribute to the rebuilding of the infrastructure, but also in conducting the type of research that can inform policy decision makers. Universities they emphasize must focus their research on regionally relevant areas, adjust programs and curricula to support these regional interests, and work with government and business entities to transfer relevant research into the commercial realm.

In essence, the university can also make use of its heritage as a collaborator to transfer outcomes of regional study and innovative research from the university to the community. The transfer may take one of the forms: training students, sparking business ventures, and conducting policy-relevant research. To achieve these, Universities must ensure that their curricula and programs are such that they are training students in innovative techniques relevant to the region. Universities should
become active in the development of business ventures, either sparking new ventures or working with existing small businesses to support their innovation needs and to transfer technologies out of the academic realm to the commercial realm. Similarly, the Universities can work with existing small businesses to implement, develop, or market new technologies. Nelson (2004) has noted that, in the past, successful growth in developing economies has been characterized by a considerable “cross-border flow of people,” where citizens go elsewhere to learn new technologies and then return to implement them. The essence is to promote regional competitiveness in a bid to ensure growth and development at all levels. This involves dissemination of information amongst parties including scientists, politicians, organizational leaders and potential entrepreneurs especially, along with getting that information acted upon in a coordinated way.

However, a number of questions have been raised with regards the activities around universities. For example, the extent to which they contribute adequately to societal development, returns on investment made in them especially those that are public universities and who should judge what universities should do, and how well are they performing. These and many more questions are been asked by academics as well as practitioners. Similarly so, debate about the role of universities in developing countries continue to dominate public discourse for basically two important reasons, Judith Sutz (2005). First, knowledge is a crucial tool for overcoming underdevelopment. Relying on rich endowments of natural resources and cheap labour, without any contribution of local 'intellectual added value', has been — and continues to be — a dead end for development, Judith Sutz (2005).

Second, knowledge is not a good for trade that can be bought and put to work with little additional effort. To achieve this successfully, a strong local knowledge base needs to be created and nurtured. Without it, the world's information riches are out of reach, and therefore become meaningless and of little value.

SIERRA LEONE UNIVERSITIES

Sierra Leone with a population of about six million has two State Universities; the University of Sierra Leone and Njala University. Fourah Bay College a constituent college of the University of Sierra Leone, the oldest, was founded on the 18th of February, 1827, by the Church Missionary Society essentially for the training of teachers and missionaries to serve in the promotion of education and the spread of Christianity in West Africa. In 1967, the College was merged with Njala University College, Moyamba District, to become the University of Sierra Leone, with a federal system. The latter was replaced in 1972 by a unitary structure which came to include the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS) and the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM).

The 2005 Universities Act further restructured the system of higher education in Sierra Leone to produce two universities viz the Njala University and the University of Sierra Leone. These two Universities are charged with the responsibilities of training students in Pure and Applied Sciences, Agriculture, Education, Environmental Sciences, Social Sciences and Law, Medical and Community Health Sciences and Technology at both Undergraduate and Postgraduate levels. While these are the fundamental functions of the Universities, scientific and technological learning is also taking place outside the universities such as in the world of business. Since 2005, the two state universities have not being able to change significantly in terms of design of programmes and course contents. But this is not unique to universities in Sierra Leone alone. Universities all over the world face similar pressures to change many of their traditional ways of operations, Sutz (2005).

However, this does not suggest inaction or justification for a country refusing to take the necessary actions that would address the challenges facing its development path. Sierra Leone was once known as a country for quality production of human resources and gained prominence for
knowledge production. Today, that legacy of past glory is relegated to history with no impact on the present, neither a solid foundation for the future. The question that readily comes to mind is where we went wrong, who the actors are and what should be done for the sustainable development of the university and how such development would impact on the country as a whole?

The paper therefore briefly discusses the present state and future of the two state universities in line with the development aspirations of the people of Sierra Leone. Unanswered questions with regards the role of the universities in knowledge production, how do they measure up to the challenges taking into account global standards and the internal wrangling that inhibit the development of the universities are discussed and attempt made to proffer solutions for sustainable development of the universities.

Universities and Development in Sierra Leone

Non Inclusion vs Universities Act of 2005

Policy designed and implementation supported by legislative acts if not inclusive might have two set goals; the “self interest goal” and the “resistance goal”. Where the state handpicked members to committees’ base on sentiments with a specific responsibility of designing state documents, it is always done in the interest of few. Sometimes members of such committees protect their jobs or interest of friends or introduce clauses that favour tribal, political and regional interests. This is done at the expense of sustainable development of the institutions while enriching individuals through unacceptable means. Those left out of the process with time will always galvanise and form a resistance especially when they were not given the opportunity of having their voices or opinions added to such sacred documents.

This was the case in the design of the Universities act 2005 where majority of those who were appointed to the committee to design the said document were either party loyalists or those who were nominated to ensure the protection of their jobs or government interest. The Staff Associations of the Universities for example were either ignored or not seen as any major player in the design of the Universities Act. Majority of those who were members of the steering committee for the draft were either University Administrators or Politicians. Trust, the corner stone for sustainable development lost its way amongst staff and administrators with each fighting for its interest instead of fighting for the development of the institutions. Today, strike actions, statements and counter statements from both lecturers and administrators are seen as daily routine activities of the Universities. This should not be left in the hands of future generations to make judgments when there is now an opportunity to correct the conscious mistakes.

Therefore, the most important factor responsible for the current state of backwardness of our Universities rest with the Universities act of 2005. The content of the document is Political and Individualistic. Political where it gives the President the power to appoint the Vice chancellor and Principal and individualistic where the Vice Chancellor’s loyalty is only to the President and himself. The issue of advancing the development of the University becomes secondary to the administrators. Today academia has suffered in the hands of bad policy document in Sierra Leone (2005 Universities Act). The multiplier effects of this wrong policy document implies that a change of governance from one political party to the other would always lead to a change in University administrators specifically, the Vice Chancellor. This consequently would affect developmental agenda of the Universities and the nation as a whole.

In addition to wrong excesses of the document, the political power game of appointments to University specialized bodies is also a course for concern. Take Njala University Court for example. The appointment of a “TC reference” holder to the University Court is not only demoralizing to the academic community but to Sierra Leone as a whole. The low knowledge base of such appointments
has devastating effects on the running of the University since the contribution of such members to
important debates on university policy issues will always be garnished in jokes thus moving away
from real issues. The absence of capacity in people appointed to perform certain functions especially in
the University is a recipe for academic chaos. The Universities Act therefore must reflect on quality
human resource deployment at all levels in order to ensure institutional growth and national
development. Therefore, recruiting and retaining best people to help in the management of institutions
is one major part of the effective and efficient institutional management equation.

Funding and Research

Japanese public universities have been a privileged sector that has not been influenced by
market competition because the government provides all required funding (Finkelstein, 2003). The
very sharp message from this is that the Japan government believes in taking the lead for the
development of their state Universities. Market forces therefore do not influence the development of
the Universities no matter the strategies used by Private Universiites.

Funds provided for universities in this context are meant for the sole purpose of the
advancement of the institutions. It includes the development of Infrastructure and technology and this
is firmly rooted in the principle of accountability and transparency. It requires the appointment of
people with reputable character to manage the affairs of the institutions with the view to providing
facilities and infrastructure that aid learning. The establishment of the Tertiary Education Commission
with its role of monitoring and evaluating tertiary education is a good step to ensure quality assurance.
This role should not be circumvented to mean just monitoring university expenditure. In actual fact,
government funding should not be linked to evaluation until the system’s trustworthiness and status are
well established (Carr, 2008; Hare, 2008). The credibility of institutional heads should be the utmost
concern to government before emphasizing evaluation of Universities activities.

The oldest tertiary institution in Sierra Leone is Fourah Bay College (FBC). Entering the
University campus gives a clear picture of the magnitude of poverty in this West African State. From
Leicester Village entering the campus, a dusty, unpaved and rouged road, a major road leading to the
centre of campus does not only present a picture of backwardness but recklessness on the thinking of
academia in the country. With traditional buildings referred to as staff quarters, it depicts the economic
status of lecturers and dependants. The university college can boost of traditional blackboards and
chalk which many a time seem to be short in supply. This university college can only boost of one
projector, with thousands of students going in search of chairs in order to attend lectures on a daily
basis.

Njala university is not different from the elder sister institution, FBC. The road network from
Tiamo to Njala Campus (Mokonde) and from Bo to Towama is indicative of the unhealthy appearance
of both students and lecturers. Dusty classrooms with all the features of the Sister University are but all
present at both University locations.

Inadequate funding over the years is the major setback for the development of the two state
universities and as such some private secondary schools cannot only boast of better infrastructure but
even in the advancement of the use of technology compared to the universities. Where computer
centers are established, very old computers abandon by western countries for the fear of the dangers of
leakages of harmful chemicals are imported and visible in rooms with no internet connectivity. The
absence of funding over the years has affected research capabilities of the universities adversely with
no room for research assessment activities. Collaborative research amongst the two state universities
and others around the globe seems to a very large extent impossible.
The universities are also supposed to be academic enterprises, capable of generating its own funds to take care of basic running cost. These could be done in a number of ways including payment of fees reflective of university service to the students. Grant – in - Aid by the Sierra Leone government in recognition and support of excellent students lost its focus over the years and today it is used as a political tool to garner student’s support for political parties. This is been done by governments at the expense of running the universities since scholarship subsidies are not paid at all or in time to universities.

A national policy that allocates special funds annually to university development is critical to the development of the universities in Sierra Leone. The provision of this would now warrant the introduction of Research Assessment Exercise similar to that of the United Kingdom for the evaluation of research quality of individual academics, projects, departments and universities (Geuna & Martin, 2003). This ultimately will help in the response of the university in addressing the gaps in national development.

Curriculum and Current Needs

Philip and Somboon believes that local cultural identities and values shape the way people live, and determine their responsiveness to educational programs, and the degree to which they feel involved in preserving a better future for generations to come. The curriculum in Sierra Leone universities are imported whole sale from some other universities and in many instances with no modifications. Curriculum design should respond to the needs of society and it serves as a key ingredient in the strategic plan of a nation’s development map. It requires the involvement of major stakeholders including members of the local communities so that local and cultural identities are accounted for in the course content.

Sierra Leone universities programmes are disconnected with the national agenda in terms of man power training. This is so because most university programmes in actual fact are not responding to societal needs and as a result, there is a low productivity in terms of our economic activities. A stop gap measures taking by industries and other organizations have being in-service training programmes for newly employed personnel to meet job requirements. The inclusion of these institutions in the design of curriculum would ensure a better life, reduce cost to society and increase economic and business opportunities. Long-established programmes in the universities are either obsolete or long overdue for curriculum review but with little attention. The reasons might not be removed again from the fact that these universities are run without a strategic management process with a focus on national development.

Many firms would require support and further education to connect with sustainability issues and to adapt to the varying paradigm. A strong need therefore arises for the universities to provide the knowledge and approaches which will enable such firms to adapt and respond to the changing environment. Departments established for this purpose in the universities should be providing leadership, courses and advice to industry, commerce and the community. To what extent the university and industries are collaborating is highly questionable if ever it exists. There is no reliable empirical data to serve as a reference point for such imagination in the strive towards developing the employment and productive sectors. In doing this the universities need to understand the motivations and needs of industry and commerce in a way that it is interpreted through the design of university curriculum. Sierra Leone Universities should understand business objectives and seek to engage in dialogue which will enable the transition to the new paradigm relating to sustainable development without compromising standards.
Ethical Behaviour- Lecturers, Students, Parents and Government

Universities should be examples of ethical consideration as well as providing students with education in ethical values, with critical intellectual skills that help in decision making, a broad view of universal ethical codes, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices. The classroom therefore should become a “laboratory” of the process of decision making, taking into account making choices in the workplace, interpersonal relationships, and personal lives. Instructors should play an important role in assisting students to view ethical choices as a vital part of their future lives, both as professionals and in their daily living. This has been demonstrated in western universities to a greater extent, while African universities are still a long way to go.

The classroom situation has been reduced beyond the scope of teacher – student relationship to a more personal interest. As such academic standards are being compromised for either cash or in kind. Because of the low capacity of student admitted into the universities, they have become humble servants and at the same time helping their tutors to run academic activities like military commanders and foot soldiers. Academic discourse either in the classroom or outside the classroom has become a thing of the past with lecturers giving academic orders while students only obey orders. Students are then left at the mercy of their tutors flouting the rules of ethical standards in academia.

The role of parents in changing the focus of academia is significant if education should respond to national development. Parents should seek for collaboration with tutors and administrators to map the way for the development of acceptable ethical behaviours. The reason is that these same parents are the politicians whose interference into the administration of the universities have nurtured indiscipline amongst students and lecturers. Because of the quest to have the supports of the students, student union elections are now supported by political parties. Student unionism is no more and the leaders come forward to be nurtured as potential candidates for political jobs, hence compromising the general interests of student colleagues. The excessive political gimmicks by politicians over the years have led to a number of violent activities amongst students especially during student union elections. There is therefore a need to reengineer the minds of both parents, students, lecturers and administrators to see the university as a place not meant for unethical behaviours.

CONCLUSION

The contribution of the universities in Sierra Leone to national development could be attainable provided a robust national policy intervention is initiated in which major stakeholders have their saying and are part of the processes of implementation. In doing so the following are suggested:

- Universities act be reviewed to reflect the appointment of the Vice Chancellor through elections by Academic Staff of the University
- The appointment of the Pro-Chancellor should be of persons of reputable character from within the community where the University is located
- TEC must push their responsibilities beyond the boundaries of just monitoring academic programmes but to mobilize resources and contribute at least 20% of annual University expenditure, lowering the burden on government.
- All registered Mining companies must pay 2% of annual profit to the University development fund while ordinary registered companies pay 1% on their annual profit. A specialize committee must be constituted to manage this fund specifically for the development of Infrastructure and Technology in the two Universities.
• All state research and consultancy programmes must be channel through the appropriate departments in the Universities and a consultancy fee paid to the university development fund. This will keep the university on constant research activities and help to link research and public demands, thus responding adequately to the problems affecting society.

• The University curriculum must be revisited for departments to include internship for at least a semester so that students are exposed to practical realities and forge acquaintance with employing agencies before graduation.

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