

# Aligning Expansion and Quality in Higher Education: An Imperative to Liberia's Economic Growth and Development

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## Abstract

This paper highlights and discusses the need for aligning expansion and quality of higher education in Liberia. It emphasizes that such initiative is inevitable to the sustainable economic growth and sociopolitical development of the country. Because with better education, Liberia as a country is sure to achieve political stability, create wealth and sustain growth. Honestly speaking, the existence of higher education institutions will make little or no impact on the nation's national development agenda in the absence of quality as the ability to undertake initiatives and be innovative largely depends on the quality of knowledge acquired. Like other countries, this paper notes that Liberia's higher education subsector continues to expand in various ways, intended to satisfy the access demand by the growing population. Consequently, there has been a tremendous increase from 3 to 30 tertiary institutions in the country. Capitalizing on Functionalist theorists' view on HE expansion that universities can go a long way towards solving societal problems through development and use of new knowledge, this paper acquiesces, but underscores that ensuring quality is very vital in the fulfillment of HE purposes. It argues that balancing HE expansion and quality is not an option, but an obligation, noting that HE is not a cosmetic or a window-dressing endeavor, but one that ought to imbue every necessary ingredient encompassing value, excellence and quality. Furthermore, as experienced by some other nations, this paper is optimistic that Liberia's sustainable economy growth and development would be immensely impacted based on increased enrollments and successful graduation of more Liberians from colleges and universities. Finally, in order to align HE expansion and quality, it recommends for establishment of legal framework and quality management and enhancement body, prioritization of higher education, proportionate provision of subsidies to private institutions, establishment of professional development center for administrators and teaching staff as well as their incorporation in bilateral and multilateral partnership programs for capacity building, improving the welfare of staff, furnishing of libraries and laboratories, synchronizing and updating the curriculum, and the need for concerted efforts to deal with quality challenges in Liberia's higher education subsector.

**Key words:** expansion, higher education, quality, economic growth and development

## 1. Introduction

There is a common saying that the world is not static, but dynamic. Whether this proposition is true or not, it is less debatable because things continue to change all over the world today. This might be attributed to growth in populations, new discoveries and inventions, varying political and social structures, technological advancement and the emergence of new ways of life. One key sector that is a driving force in some of these changes is education, which begins from the day we were born and ends the day we die (Ballantine, 1997). However, higher education (HE) is arguably the most important contributor to some of these modern changes. Knowledge being acquired from HE has made life easier, faster, smoother and pleasurable; it is prudent for our generation and the ones yet unborn to harmoniously embrace it.

This is not to insinuate, however, that this is a neonate concept. The Dearing Report (1997) underscores the significance of higher education noting that for the state, higher education has become a crucial asset; it must recognize what it will gain from ensuring the wellbeing of higher education. Besides, World Bank (2000) in a report states that without more and better higher education, developing countries will find it increasingly difficult to benefit from the global knowledge-based economy. Additionally, Bloom, Canning, and Chan (2006) explain that in a knowledge economy, tertiary education can help economies keep up or catch up with more technologically advanced societies.

The above points are intended to provide an insightful prelude about the relevance of higher education and why it must not be overlooked. Inclusive in its nomenclature, 'higher' portrays a considerable locus of supremacy. By classification, higher education includes all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary and tertiary level, provided by universities or other recognized higher educational institutions (HEIs) (UNESCO, 2011). It notes that despite the diversity of higher education systems across countries, one may distinguish four broad categories of higher education: diploma programs, bachelor's degree,

master's degree and doctorate. Materu (2007) also explains that HEIs are tertiary institutions whose legal mandates allow them to award degrees. Considering its foremost nature, HE plays a key role in contributing to national development through the training of human resources with advanced knowledge and skills, production and dissemination of knowledge, and the promotion of science and technology. In a nutshell, intuitively, it is a microcosm on which every facet of the society relies on for vibrancy and soundness, whether it is at political, social or economic level and dimension.

Predicated upon its vitality, higher education is also prone to change as society changes. Over time, changes have occurred in the governance, administrative structures, the curriculum, and the composition of the student body in higher education (Ballantine, 1997). Ballantine observes that HE has expanded rapidly around the world in the past half-century. Obviously, one of the reasons for such expansion is the incessant need to appease the access demand of tertiary education based on the growing student population around the world. As a result, there have been increased efforts to decentralize higher education institutions world-wide. For instance, Bloom et al. (2006) indicate that signs of progress for higher education are appearing in Sub-Saharan Africa. Congruently, Frazer (2005) also forecasts some level of progress, highlighting that HE will have to change significantly in the coming years by promoting reforms that increase access and equity in higher education. This expansion testament brings us to the primary focus of this paper, expansion versus quality of higher education with Liberia as a case in point.

One Sub-Saharan African country that is inclusive in such expansion progress pathway with regards to its higher education is the West African nation of Liberia. From 3 tertiary education institutions in the entire country in the 1980s (Sirleaf, 2012), there are now 2 Master's degree-granting institutions, 9 Bachelor's degree and 19 Associate degree granting colleges and universities in Liberia with an estimated enrollment of 43,843 (National Commission on Higher Education Report, 2012). Glancing at the figures, one needs not to be told how the HE subsector of Liberia has strikingly sprouted and expanded over the years. Consequently, the country's higher education subsector has transcended from centralized to decentralized stage (Bloom et al., 2006). Solely sticking to the expansion mentality without considering quality factors, one can instantaneously proffer that it is a panacea for the country's sustainable economic growth and development. Without jumping the gun, the expansion of HE like, perhaps, any other human endeavor should not take place in isolation of quality. To illustrate this point, let's divert a bit.

Imagine you are a proprietor at one of the two newly established local bakery shops adjacent each other in the Soul Clinic Community in Paynesville, Liberia involved in the baking business. Taking all factors constant, you and your friend competitor possess some commonalities including income level. After one month of operation, to your outermost dismay, you noticed that a sizable number of your potential customers no longer come and purchase from your shop but that of your rival, eventhough, the price of his commodity is the same or even higher than yours. As a wise proprietor, a number of points will begin to seriate your mind. Certainly, one of those points would be the quality of product and service being provided. Rationally, this analogy is applicable to every aspect of our society once it is incorporated in such context, for instance, the higher education subsector. Have you ever wondered why Harvard, Cambridge and Peking Universities are one of the best in America, UK and China, respectively? If you did, all your answers might bow down to one, yet debatable word 'quality' whether it is in their teaching or research. Delving into the nitty-gritty of the debate of quality, however, is beyond the scope of this article. Notwithstanding, elucidation will be propounded from the domain of higher educational expansion and quality and how it can be fostered subsequently.

As the higher education subsector continues to expand with the surfacing of private institutions on the scene, the issue of quality evolves. For example, Materu (2007) notes that concern about the quality of higher education is on the rise in Africa. Equally, the maintenance and enhancement of quality, and attempts to define and measure quality, are now major issues for higher education in many countries. As HE expands its tentacles, there is a growing concern about its quality (Frazer, 2005), which Liberia is no exception in relation to its expansion of higher education as illustrated earlier. In its report, Education for All Global Monitoring (2013) expresses concern that yet many countries that have made significant gains in improving access have not made corresponding progress in improving education quality. Also, in her 93rd commencement convocation address at state-run University of Liberia, President Sirleaf notes 'we need to improve the quality of service and output to make it meaningful to our existing objective', adding 'we must not lose sight of the importance of quality education, around which every aspect of the planning of our vision for a new Liberia must evolve' (Sirleaf, 2012, p. 2). Though her statement did not unequivocally condemn the country's HE quality, it is palpable that all is not well with it, especially relative to the quality of teaching and research.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to dissect the issue of quality in Liberia's higher education subsector as well as to highlight and discuss the need to align or match its expansion and quality. This paper sees such

alignment of the nation's fast-growing HE with quality as an imperative to the country's sustainable economic growth and development based on the fact that without quality, the existence of higher education institutions will make little or no impact on the nation's development agenda, least to say contribute positively to the global community. This is pertinent because the ability to undertake initiatives and be innovative largely depends on the quality and knowledge acquired (Collins, 1998). Consistent with its purpose, this paper will probe and deliberate on higher educational issues and challenges in Liberia appertaining expansion and quality, relying on relevant literatures and experiences to make extrapolations. Finally, it intends to make relevant recommendations regarding benefits the country tends to accrue for balancing expansion and quality of higher education.

## **2. Origin, reform and expansion of HE in Liberia**

### *2.1 Origin*

The origin of Liberia's higher education subsector is traced from 1851 when the then National Legislature passed an Act, authorizing the formation of a state college. However, this mandate was not fulfilled until January 1858 when the institution's cornerstone was laid and formally inaugurated in 1862 and began operation 1863. Today, Liberia College now known as University of Liberia (UL) remains a major public funded tertiary institution in the country, accounting for over 54% of the enrollment in higher education (National Commission on Higher Education Report, 2012). In 1889, private-run Cuttington University (CU) was established in central Liberia by the Episcopal Church of the United States. Decades later, William V.S. Tubman College of Technology (WVSTC) now named Tubman University (TU) was established in 1978, making it the second public tertiary education in Liberia (National Commission on Higher Education's Report, 2009). These tertiary institutions were, notably, the ones that existed up to the end of the 1980s.

As efforts were being gradually galvanized to decentralize the country's tertiary education subsector, the Liberian civil war erupted in 1989. Like any conflict, no fabric was spared. These institutions and other emerging higher education institutions were wrecked and left in ruins by the civil discord at the disadvantage of the nation's future leaders. As a result of the 14-year civil conflict, their infrastructure, equipment, facilities, libraries, laboratories and buildings were considerably or totally damaged, looted, or destroyed. In addition, they experienced massive brain drain of their qualified professors and administrative personnel, resulting in their early reliance on bachelor-degree faculty for instructional purposes (Education Sector Plan of Liberia, 2010-2020, quoted by National Commission on Higher Education Report, 2012).

### *2.2 Reforms*

Following the cessation of the Liberian civil unrest in 2003 and the inauguration of a new democratic government in January 2006, the Liberian government through the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), the primary overseer of the country's HE, commenced instituting several reform measures to ensure that quality is rekindled. One of such measures includes the closure of colleges and universities labeled as 'bogus'. Accordingly, in 2007, the Liberian government through NCHE reported the shutting down of 28 out of 51 colleges and universities, most of which operated in Monrovia until they meet set minimum requirements to operate as tertiary institutions in Liberia. Before the establishment of any tertiary institution in Liberia, it is mandatory for would-be operators to meet set policies by the National Commission on Higher Education and obtain charter to operate from the National Legislature prior to being permitted to operate in the country (Slawon, 2010). The closed institutions felt shut of these requirements. The intent was to promote quality of higher education, instead of having HEIs that merely accommodate students and following graduation, they are incapacitated to demonstrate their competencies in contributing to the sustainable growth and development of the society (Slawon, 2010). Quality activists see such move as a step forward considering the financial motive of some operators.

In furtherance, there was a synchronization of Liberia's higher education curriculum for freshman and sophomore with the incorporation of some contemporary courses and disciplines inclusive of science and technology. This was deemed prudent because the curricula of various colleges and universities formerly lacked uniformity as each institution decided on its instructional modus operandi. Adversely, credits from one college or university could not be accepted by another. However, the curriculum synchronization remedied the situation to some extent, prompting inter-college and inter-university acceptance of credits. Though, the reforms may seem infinitesimal, no doubt, they are part of building blocks to fostering better higher education, especially the closure of colleges and universities that supposedly had the tendency to shield a gloomy picture on the country's HE subsector.

### *2.3 HE Expansion*

Basically, expansion has to do with an act of increasing something in its size, volume, quantity or scope. Hence, higher educational expansion, in this context, means initiatives geared towards increasing the establishment of

colleges and universities to increase accessibility of higher education to facilitate the accommodation of the growing number of student population.

In Liberia, following the shutting down of some colleges and universities, the Liberian government through NCHE embarked on the decentralization of higher education. In light of this, four regional colleges have been constructed and opened in four of Liberia's fifteen counties namely: Grand Bassa, Bomi, Nimba and Lofa as well as reopened Tubman University in Maryland County, which was forced to close down because of the civil war. Moreover, efforts are being exerted towards the establishment of more public community colleges in the country. Other technical institutions are also being constructed and made operational. Based on the expansion drives, higher education in Liberia now comprises thirty (30) institutions (National Commission on Higher Education Report, 2012), far beyond the three (3) that existed in the 1980s. This is a manifestation of how much HE has expanded over the years in Liberia.

Theoretically, Functionalist or consensus theorists think that universities can go a long way towards solving societal problems through development and use of new knowledge (Ballantine, 1997). Thus, Functionalist approach propounds three reasons for expansion of higher education. They include: Higher education is desirable to help improve individual opportunities; higher education increases the possibility of equal opportunities by teaching the skills required in complex technological world, and thereby improving an individual's ability to compete and fit into the system in a productive way; and society needs higher education to help prepare individuals to fill essential roles; this argument has been put forward to expand higher education in developing regions (Ballantine, 1997, p.249-250).

Capitalizing on this perspective, the paper acquiesces that expansion of HE is important, especially in a developing country like Liberia, where poverty and inequality are structurally ingrained with an estimated 85% of the population without formal employment (figures have ranged from 80% to 85% for years), and 84% of the population living on less than \$1.25 per day (BTI 2012, Liberia Country Report), the expansion of higher education could be very meaningful. This is because many less privileged people will possibly have access to higher education. Nonetheless, compromising quality in the name of access is detrimental. Increased access to higher education as being projected by the government of Liberia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be of little or no value if quality is poor and pupils graduate without the requisite standard knowledge or skills in commensuration with government's national development programme (Collins, 1998). It has been noted that expansion is not a phenomenon contrary to quality (Alemu, 2010). Therefore, let it not be hastened to emphasize that expansion of HE must not go in isolation, meaning the process of expanding higher education must be on par or aligned with the quality it offers. This may seem challenging, but it is an aura of higher education.

In 2012, President Sirleaf identifies three key responsibilities of a university. First, every university is intended to produce the human capital needed for the realization of national socio-economic agenda, which must be of quality and relevant locally and internationally. Second, a university provides the space to undertake research that facilitates knowledge, improves the quality of life and enables policy makers make informed decisions. And third, a university must take the lead in providing think-tank services for the public and private sectors of society. Analytically, higher education does have greater weight on our world; hence, it collectively behooves every individual to contribute towards its viability and productivity. One way we can do that is by promoting its quality.

### **3. Quality in higher education**

#### *3.1 What quality entails?*

From the available literature, what quality in higher education actually is appears to be debatable (see Harrison, 2000), which is it sometimes equated to value. Correspondingly, what value is, and what it is not, is hard to decipher, and the literature, generally, demonstrates how slippery this is perceived to be, irrespective of context (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014). Similarly, Harvey and Green (1993) indicate that quality means different things to different individuals as stakeholders in higher education can have different viewpoints on it. However, concerns and priorities of academic staff and professional bodies, students and government, and funding agencies can constitute quality. Similarly, they propose five different approaches in viewing quality: in terms of exceptional (higher standards), consistency (zero defects and getting it right the first time), as fitness for purpose (meeting stated purposes), as value for money and as transformative (transformation of the participant). In the view of Materu (2007), quality refers to "fitness for purpose" meeting or conforming to generally accepted standards as defined by an institution. Nonetheless, it is much broader and includes standards as well as the processes of teaching and learning, the activities of departments and institutions and the congruence between the goals of a programme and the competences of its graduates (Frazer, 2005).

As avowed earlier, delving into the nitty-gritty of quality debate is beyond the scope of this article. Notwithstanding, analytically speaking, the phenomenon of quality does not appear incomprehensible or slippery as it might be perceived. Eventhough it is possible for differentiations in the way we can construe quality, which



is humanly permissible, everyone sees and sometimes feels quality in something whenever it actually exists. In higher education, for instance, when an institution is providing quality education, one does not need to be told about the actions and impacts of its products as they would be visible in its vicinity and beyond. Holt (2000) considers quality in education as an evaluation of the process of educating which enhances the need to achieve and develop the talents of the customers of the process, and at the same time meets the accountability standards set by the clients who pay for the process or the outputs from the process of educating. It is this quality in education that makes learning pleasurable and a joyful (Tribus, 2005)

To deliberate on this phenomenon of quality, envisage you really desire a cup of tea and got it. However, you lacked milk and sugar to add to it. Would you truly satisfy your desire for it? In another context, you went to school from elementary to college or university and graduated. But, you are unable to get employed or even deliver a meaningful service to the society due to incapability as you lack of requisite knowledge and competence in your professedly trained field. How much would it profit you? I surmised your answer in terms of benefits is little or nothing. Logically, it is like being called a rich man but you can't afford to feed your household, solidifying the need for the alignment of expansion and quality in HE.

Juxtaposing the current scenario with the one in one of the earlier paragraphs, this paper firmly infers that education, principally higher education, is not a cosmetic or a window-dressing endeavor. It is an enterprise destined to infuse every necessary ingredient all-encompassing value, excellence and quality aimed at fulfilling its true dogma of existence in all of its services and programs. So, every HE institution must have some ability to contribute to the production of sufficient manpower to meet human and societal needs. In other words, established HEIs must not be like toothless bulldogs, masquerading in academic corridors with little or nothing to offer the society rather to gain monetary or other benefits. They should, therefore, always strive to provide quality education to their students.

To achieve the goal of quality provision, it is prudent to consider what is desirable and beneficial to both consumers and to the service provider himself. In particular, quality achievement is the intertwined attainment of self-satisfaction and customer-satisfaction relative to set goals and standards. This means, in order to achieve true quality, institutional operator as well as customers (students, parents, employers, government & the public in general) must be satisfied concomitantly regarding the quality of education being provided. In most cases, nevertheless, meeting self-satisfaction is easier to achieve, but the latter seems challenging. So, it is proposed that more attention be given to ensuring customers' satisfaction in the higher education system as it is reciprocal.

### *3.2 Quality concerns and issues appertaining quality of higher education in Liberia*

#### *3.2.1 Why quality concerns?*

One concern of quality of HE in Liberia derives from the level of expansion. As it is often said 'quantity affects quality'. Whether this proposition is factual or fallacious, what is worth pondering about is how we arrived at quantity in HE, as quantity itself is not distasteful. What is obnoxious, nonetheless, is to have more that is incapable of serving the intended purposes. In Liberia, higher education has experienced enormous expansion over the past one decade plus as mentioned previously. It is must be noted, however, that this is not unique to Liberia. For instance, according to Alemu (2010), 60 private for-profit institutions were opened in Ethiopia between 1996 and 2005. In 2007, Materu alarms that because of the growing recognition of the potentially powerful role of tertiary education for growth, it is a natural response to public perception that educational quality is being compromised in an effort to expand enrollment in recent years as numerous private and transnational providers enter the scene. Liberia's higher education boss, Slawon (2010) blames proliferation of sub-standard higher education institutions to mere financial gains, which were eventually compelled to close their doors to students.

Concerns towards HE in Liberia, ranging from the top leadership (Sirleaf, 2012) to the regulating body, NCHE and the common man are, no doubt, healthy for higher education institutions in Liberia. This shows that people are interested in HE and recognize its necessity to them and their nation. Obviously, expansion of private higher education institutions is to be hailed, but it should not be at the expense of quality (Alemu, 2010). While competition between private and public tertiary institutions may be helpful in the administration of tertiary education, it is vital for the issue of quality to continue to remain at its peak. This will ensure the realization of higher educational objectives.

#### *3.2.2 Where Liberia's HE quality lies and what are its challenges?*

To ensure quality in higher education, many characteristics must be considered. Perhaps, this has triggered the quality debate in higher education. According to Collins (1998) quality is enhanced by teacher and staff training as well as curricula that conform to national and international demands for sustainable development; adequate requisite instructional materials and equipment and the exchange of knowledge and information. For Murnane (1987), educational inputs, outputs, and processes need to be imbedded for quality to be achieved. They include

financial measures (educational expenditures per student), physical measures (the age, condition, and comprehensiveness of such facilities as classrooms, laboratories, and libraries and the provision and use of international materials and equipment), and manpower or human resource measures (number of personnel of different types such as educational qualifications, experience, and perhaps knowledge competencies and attitudes). Similarly, these educational inputs that can foster quality in higher education have also been discussed by Frazer (2005). For Frazer, inputs include factors relating to the students (qualifications, experience and aspirations), factors relating to the teaching staff (professional experience, qualifications, staff development on teaching, etc.), factors relating to the administrative and technical staff, and factors relating to the physical facilities (workshops, laboratories, classrooms and in particular the library). Like other nations, Liberia's HE quality also lies in the just mentioned areas as they have been at the center of quality concerns in the country.

In Liberia, it remains a challenge to balance expansion and quality in the higher education subsector. Though strides have been reported through staff development and training programs at local levels, it is still a challenge because training is not quick fixed. In different words, it is not like putting down a structure or building, which can be done over a short period of time. Enhancing quality of teachers requires longer time, remarkable efforts, expertise and sizable amount of resources. These are needed because the civil war caused a devastating blow to all the achievements, not only in universal basic and secondary education, but equally to the higher education subsector (Collins, 1998). Predicated upon the brain drain created by the civil war, somewhat unqualified teachers have to augment the strength of the competent and professional professors and lecturers who often have to provide lectures at more than one college or university on a daily basis. As a fundamental element of institutional success, quality must be part of an integrated approach which incorporates all types of trainings necessary for enhanced effectiveness and efficiency.

The quality of teaching staff definitely has direct correlation to the quality of students. This is realistic because teachers cannot give what they don't possess. This is to state that if the teachers lack quality, there is a high likelihood for it to be replicated in the performances of students before or after graduation. For Liberia's tertiary education students and graduates, measuring their performances is an intricate issue. There are no national examinations to evaluate college or university graduates; their performances are usually assessed by their employers which are not done in a holistic manner. However, a regional examination, WAEC in 2013 reports some decline in the performances of junior and high school students with nearly 70% passing its exam, but none of the candidates obtaining division one ([www.micatliberia.com](http://www.micatliberia.com), waec results, 2013). Holding this constant, it means that junior and secondary school teachers' quality must be prioritized and enhanced if students are to perform better in the nearer future.

With regards to Liberia's higher education curriculum, it has been synchronized to some extent. However, the synchronization was only done for freshman and sophomore students, which means that it is incomplete. Ballantine (1997) notes that pressures for more representative multicultural curriculum and higher educational opportunities for more segments of populations around the world have become key issues. Hence, this should also be an issue for Liberia's higher education subsector; it must consider the complete synchronization of the curriculum with the inclusion of emerging disciplines in science and technology that will contribute towards the process of attaining quality. Such initiative must be routinely done to prevent the curriculum from being outdated. Besides, colleges and universities are prone to other challenges. Almost all public and private educational structures, materials and supplies, libraries, research centers, and laboratories were looted or destroyed (Collins, 1998) as result of the civil war. Though, many of these institutions were emerged after the civil crisis, most of them are not exempted from challenges created like shortage of funds, unqualified teachers, low professional competencies and inadequate research facilities. These problems are ought to be seriously tackled with every forte within our dominion as the country has been peaceful and stable for the past one decade plus.

### *3.2.3 Other hidden challenges affecting HE quality in Liberia*

It is essential to highlight that the above mentioned challenges are indisputably the most obvious contributors to the decline of quality in Liberia. However, there are other challenges that possibly impinge upon quality assurance. Eventhough, they might have some links with the previously mentioned, they are in different forms.

*Mediocre and unethical dispositions by some instructors:* To admit, it may sound preposterous to say some attitudes of a number of instructors seem mediocre, but it is true in some instances. Imagine an instructor walks in a class and sees a little over forty freshman medical students and says, oh, everyone here wants to be a medical doctor? Some of you will really fail in this class! What impression do such dispiriting comments leave on the minds of students? Definitely, it does not only make them less self-efficacious, but gives them the impression that they've found themselves in an improper arena. Besides, some instructors are even cynical of providing resourceful reference materials for use by their students with the perception and fear that some will surpass them in knowledge or threaten their job security. Such actions are not only mediocre and unethical, but

they have the proclivity of largely affecting the quality of education because it will trigger decline in learners' performances. As a matter of fact, classroom motivation and management constitutes one of the responsibilities of an instructor as motivation is a vital element for effective instruction (Slavin, 2006). This is important because the academic success of students depend on their interest in the course and the instructor. Therefore, it is anticipated that instructors (lecturers, professors) live above any act of mediocrity and unethically, striving to inculcate knowledge and cultivating the full potentials of their learners.

*Get it free mentality:* Though it has since been highly emphasized about the roles instructors play in ensuring the success of students (Coleman report, 1966), it is worth mentioning that students too even have greater responsibilities in controlling their own learning. Cognizant of that, constructivist theorists of learning accentuate the need for learners to individually discover and transform complex information, checking new information against old rules and revising the rules when they no longer work (Slavin, 2006). However, complacency on the part of some learners with their academic works does not augur well for the quality of education they acquire. Because of such indolent attitudes, some of these students often develop what is referred to as 'get it free mentality'. In this context, this type of mentality refers to the pursuit of attaining scores, accolades and/or other forms of recognition which a learner doesn't merit. Such attitude can lead to bribery as well as other forms of corruptible acts in the education sector. This is not only detrimental to said learners themselves, but unfavorably affects the society as a whole. Learners must, therefore, always strive for quality as this is key to their futuristic roles.

*Contributing to knowledge attrition:* In academia, contributing to existing knowledge in one's domain or related discipline is absolutely essential. This is perhaps one of the best ways to become an authority in a particular field. Intuitively, this could be an underlining reason why students, especially master's and Ph.D. candidates are normally required to undertake and complete an original research work prior to graduation. Understandably, such contribution must not stop with theses or dissertations. There must be continual sharing of knowledge through publications of journal articles and books, etc. Liberian learners will, without dubiety, exceedingly appreciate reading and analyzing articles and books written about education, economics, sociology, business, psychology, physics, medicine, engineering, agriculture and the like by their fellow compatriots. This is not to insinuate, however, that there are no books or articles written by Liberian authors, but it is a wakeup call for more. By lecturers and professors discussing their own projects with students, it will stimulate them to follow suit, thus fostering the quality of education.

*Unpatriotic involvements:* Frankly, this final point on some of the hidden challenges confronting HE quality in Liberia seems more political than educational. Notwithstanding, the idea of patriotism can fit in all sectors because it involves every facet of the society. In this perspective, unpatriotic involvements relate to any misdemeanor, infelicity or wrongdoing that has the tendency of impeding the provision of quality education. It is obvious that one of the major obligations of any citizen of a country is to show revered love for one's country in both deeds and words. In the higher education subsector, such patriotism must be exhibited by all stakeholders including government, administrators, instructors, students, parents, etc with all fairness, sincerity, commitment and dedication for the common good and general benefit of the nation and the society as a whole.

### *3.3 Need for balancing expansion and quality in Liberia's higher education*

Since Liberia's return to civility and democratic rule, education especially the quality of higher education has been on the lips of many Liberians including President Sirleaf, seeing it as a major tool for the nation's secured future. This is not, nevertheless, unique to Liberia and Liberians. In industry, in commerce, in government circles and now in higher education the word 'quality' is on everyone's lips: 'quality control', 'quality circles', 'total quality management', 'quality assurance', and so on (Frazer, 2005). Economic development momentum and accomplishments of a nation are directly proportional to its investment in tertiary education. A nation depends heavily on the human capital produced by tertiary educational institutions for its leaders, thinkers, planners, inventors and managers (Sirleaf, 2012). As a matter of fact, illiteracy was considered one of the root causes of the Liberia's brutal and violent civil conflict. Although this is not substantiated by empirical evidence, it is perceived that war mongers capitalized on the whims and caprices of the gullible illiterate population to unravel conflict. Whether this proposition is true or false, dealing with poverty and inequality still requires quality education. This is because education helps in the holistic development of an individual, instilling skill, discipline and transforming the person's mind. It is no secret that most developed countries today have considerable human capital.

In Liberia, the quality of higher education being offered by colleges and universities remains a contentious issue despite the implementation of some reform mechanisms by government. It relates to employers' somewhat preferences of foreign graduates in juxtaposition to those trained in the country. This is directly proportional to quality. This could have negative repercussions for Liberia, a country emerging from war and human sufferings.

It has the potential of creating distrust and dissatisfaction among the country's citizens if a certain group enjoys more job privileges and better opportunities than others because of the quality of education they attained abroad. This could probably result to a revolt from those who are less favored. Thus, there is a need to complement the quality of HE in Liberia with that of other countries to eradicate such disparity.

Moreover, in 2005, Frazer refers to accountability as the reason why we do need quality assurance in higher education. Both public and private colleges and universities are accountable to their service providers and by extension government does the same to its people because it is the regulator of these institutions. In the view of Ballantine (1997), students are clients of the system, buying a service, and members of the system, playing an integral part in its functioning. Administrators must be jugglers, maintaining a delicate balance of goodwill between the environmental factors crucial to the institution and the academic interests of faculty and the student body. As enshrined in the definition of quality: value for money (Harvey et al., 1993), students and other individuals who give in to these tertiary institutions should be able to get an appreciable return for their money. Clearly, college type and quality are important determinants of returns from education in terms of salary and prestige (Ballantine, 1997).

#### **4. Economic and other benefits for aligning HE expansion and quality in Liberia**

As noted in the earlier paragraphs and intermittently in this paper, higher education is very essential to any country, especially for its economic growth. Before exploring some of these benefits, it is expedient to backtrack to highlight some purposes of higher education. For instance, the Dearing report in 1997 proposes four purposes of higher education as follows:

- *To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest levels throughout life, so that they can grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively and achieve personally fulfillment.*
- *To increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society.*
- *To serve the need of an adaptable, sustainable and knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels. And*
- *To play a major role shaping a democratic, inclusive society (Dearing, 1997).*

Critically looking at the above HE purposes, one can point out that with their fullest fulfillment, society is bound to become a better place for the existence of human kind. Though it is easier said than done, it is imperative for all of us to realize that our progress in this world highly rests on the administration of higher education; it has a huge overarching impact, primarily on economic growth. In a conceptual framework, Bloom, et al. (2006) propound numerous benefits of higher education as they discussed Higher Education and Economic Development in Africa. Basically, higher education graduates are likely to be more aware of and better able to use new technologies and proffer new ideas. They are also more likely to develop new tools and skills themselves.

Empirically, it has been proven in a number of studies that higher education has a greater impact on economic growth. For example, Wolff and Gittleman (1993) showed that university enrollment rates are correlated with labor productivity growth as well as the number of scientists and engineers per capita is also associated with economic growth. In a time series analysis of the United Kingdom, an index of total factor productivity and its relationship to different levels of educational attainment when higher education qualifications (including undergraduate, postgraduate, and other tertiary graduate stock) increased by 1 per cent, annual output grew between 0.42 and 0.63 per cent (Jenkins, 1995). Moreover, a study in Taiwan showed that higher education played a strong role in the country's economic growth (T-C Lin, 2004). It found that a 1 per cent rise in higher education stock led to a 0.35 per cent rise in industrial output, and that a 1 per cent increase in the number of graduates from engineering or natural sciences led to a 0.15 per cent increase in agricultural output. Further, Bloom et al. (2006) said Bloom, Hartley, and Rosovsky in 2006 showed that workers in US states where the proportion of college graduates is high earn significantly more than those in states with few graduates, whether or not they have received a tertiary education themselves.

From the above empirical pieces of evidence, it is categorically obvious that higher education has enormous impact on economic growth, which is contributive of holistic growth and development. Liberia being a developing country, investing substantially in quality of higher education will ensure the training of more Liberians to enable them develop their full potentials in science and technology which will have greater stimulus on the country's progress. Higher education may create greater tax revenue, increase savings and investment, and lead to a more entrepreneurial and civic society and it can also improve a nation's health, contribute to reduced population growth, improve technology, and strengthen governance (Bloom et al., 2006).



Like in the cases of UK, Taiwan and the US mentioned above, Liberia's economy could also boom with increased enrollments and successful graduation of more young Liberians from colleges and universities. As a country gifted with huge natural resources including rubber, gold, diamonds, timber, iron ore, and now crude oil among others, the nation could stand a better chance in its sustainable recovery drives with more quality products of HE. This is because Liberian graduates will be able to take control in the management of these resources for the prosperity and development of their nation.

Due to the current manpower gaps, foreign experts are usually brought in to offer their expertise in various areas which does not augur well for the fast-track growth and development of the country. The millions of dollars regularly spent on these foreign experts could be invested in poverty striking Liberians as well as the higher education subsector. This is not, however, a show of any naivety on the contributions of foreign experts, but it is apparent that Liberia can only be built by Liberians. Hence, government should wake-up from its slumber and act towards having more Liberians receive adequate quality higher education to enable them economically develop and move their state forward. It is fervently hoped that government's intention to make Liberia a middle income country by 2030 will be actualized with more investments in HE. Predicated upon this, it is incumbent and expedient upon this paper to propose some measures aimed at enhancing and aligning expansion and quality of tertiary education in Liberia.

## **5. Suggestions/Recommendations for aligning HE expansion and quality in Liberia**

### *5.1 Legal framework*

Liberia needs a vibrant higher education legal framework to enable the country deal some of its higher educational challenges. Meaningful contributions and operations of the private sector are dependent on the quality of the legal framework and the enforcement mechanisms in place (Alemu, 2010). As noted by Bloom et al. in 2006, Liberia has no higher education laws. Each institution of higher education is autonomous and operates under a charter provided by the state; a board of trustees provided for under the charter governs each institution. Having a charter to operate is not enough guarantee that the operator will provide quality services to its clients. The nation needs clearly defined higher education laws relative to processes of setting and operation of colleges and universities in the country. It should provide for high quality standards with regards to the administrative, faculty and teaching staff compositions. An accreditation body should be constituted for would-be faculty and teaching staff at colleges and universities to curbe the infiltration of unqualified and unprofessional individuals into the system. Besides, it must provide for regularly monitoring and evaluation of the performances of both administrative and teaching staff aimed at dealing with any acts of ineptitude and unethicality. Moreover, quality and quality assurance mechanisms should be clearly stated, with a mandate for the fullest adherence to them by operators of colleges and universities. A taskforce under the directorship of the National Commission on Higher Education (regulator of HEIs) should be setup and fully empowered to vigorously implement such laws to ensure compliance.

### *5.2 Establishment of quality management and enhancement Body*

To enhance HE quality in Liberia, having quality management and enhancement body is very essential. Such body should be enthralled with the authority to evaluate various educational inputs, processes and outputs of HEIs in the country. One of its objectives must be to pursue quality enhancement, a system for consciously and consistently improving the quality performance of any process (Bayne-Jardine & Wood, 2000). In this vein, it should explore possibilities for a sophisticated system for staff development and training as well as conscious methods of addressing and solving systemic HE problems. Based on its evaluation of various activities of HEIs, it should begin the process of providing an unbiased ranking for tertiary institutions in Liberia. This will propel more competitions for improved quality among colleges and universities as they would strive to do their best to attract student enrolment, especially private institutions. Besides, this will give prospective students the opportunity to make better and informed choices about institutions they intend to attend.

### *5.3 Prioritization of higher education by government*

Government has a critical to play role in enhancing the quality of tertiary education. According to Ballantine (1997), government has a degree of power over institutions of higher education through the control of money. Similarly, education as a public good needs the checks and balances of government (Alemu, 2010). Apart from setting up legal framework and expanding of higher education to rural areas, it can live by example through ensuring that all of its higher education institutions are up-to-date and have high quality. By doing this, it will be raising the bar for private institutions to follow suit. Additionally, the Liberian government needs to show stronger political will by increasing its support to higher education. For instance, the National Commission on Higher Education, which is a very critical government entity, is among the least funded in Liberia. Considering its pivotal role, increased budgetary support to it will be very awesome and laudable.

#### *5.4 Proportionate provision of subsidies to private institutions*

No doubt, private colleges and universities are very important contributors to higher education. Without the existence of private tertiary institutions, it will be difficult for government alone to meet with demands for providing quality higher education to all of its citizens and foreign residents. Therefore, in the spirit of strengthening a balance, chartered and accredited private institutions should be subsidized proportionately, considering enrollment status, programs focus, capacity needs and institution's contribution to national development to enable them to operate effectively. With the provision of subsidies to them, government will have some jurisdiction in their operations, for example, the determining to what extent students should be charged for enrolment, as the saying goes to whom much is given, much is expected.

#### *5.5 Establish professional development center for administrators and teaching staff*

In order to ensure quality in any institution, the quality of the staff cannot be over-emphasized. As reminded decades ago by the Coleman report in 1966, the quality of teachers correlates with that of the students. This is obvious because before knowledge is transmitted it must be in the possession of the giver. In other words, teachers should be in the possession of quality before they can replicate it into the students. This is why Salvin (2006, p.5-6) mentions that 'good teacher can be taught to know the principles of good teaching to be applied in the classroom which include making decision, self-knowledge and self-regulation, application of education research, and reflection'.

Considering the need for the professional development of administrators and teaching staff at higher education institutions in Liberia, having a center to be in the business of hosting refresher trainings for them to boost their skills will go a long way in enhancing their capabilities to perform up to the task. It is suggested that the center should be supported by government and its partners to occasionally invite expert lecturers and professors from various domains at home and abroad to perform such tasks, most especially for the new teachers who have requisite academic qualifications but lack the necessary experiences. Emphasis must be placed on ethical principles. Besides, the center must encourage the intermingling of new teachers with old ones aimed at opening the system; experienced teachers must not overlook or undermine newly trained teachers. To put it in another way, there should a level playing field for everyone involved to optimize his/her full potentials without hindrance or suppression.

#### *5.6 Incorporation of administrative and teaching staff skills development in bilateral and multilateral partnership programs*

In addition to the local refresher trainings, it is wise to incorporate administrative and teaching staff in the bilateral and multilateral partnership programs to enhance their skills. Investment in high-quality training is an essential element in developing a 'quality culture' in any institution; training is an integral component of managing quality (Jones & Mathias, 2005). Enabling administrators and teaching staff to go abroad for further trainings or studies to obtain terminal degrees (Ph.D., postdoctoral, etc.) will be very valuable in increasing their professional expertise. To complement their strengths, some young Liberians desirous of contributing to the higher education subsector should be given similar opportunity to study abroad and return to join others to make tertiary education viable and reliable in Liberia.

#### *5.7 Improving the welfare of HE staff*

Salaries and incentives are key motivators in the world of work. With limited salaries and incentives, there is a high probability for underperformances on the part of administrators, faculty members and teachers as well as the surfacing of other irregularities. As producers of what the country will benefit from at a larger level, they should be properly taken care of. Their salaries and incentives should be on par with international standards in commensuration with their credentials and expertise. This will curb teacher attrition which remains one of the key challenges confronting educational systems across the world inclusive of Liberia.

#### *5.8 Furnishing of libraries and laboratories*

In order for proper learning to occur, both teaching staff and students must have access to updated libraries and laboratories. As one of the problems created by the civil unrest, efforts should be directed towards ensuring that all colleges and universities have well-furnished libraries and with up-to-date books and laboratories. Electronic online libraries with stable internet facilities are highly recommended. This will reduce the level of stress students usually undergo in their studies, predominantly when performing assigned tasks.

#### *5.9 Synchronizing and updating of the curriculum*

The synchronization of the curriculum is an important issue because the curriculum serves as a guide regarding what should be taught in colleges and universities. Eventhough there are variations in programs of colleges and universities, it is required to have a synchronized curriculum for all levels to befit colleges and universities that offer similar programs or have identical fields of study, which should be routinely carried out by a panel of

academics for all levels. It is recommended for such process to take place every three years. Updating the curriculum recurrently by educational authorities and experts is very critical because things continue to change all over the world and the curriculum should be prepared in a way to suit and meet up with job market demands.

#### *5.10 Concerted efforts*

According to Ballantine (1997), each of us has a role in the system of higher education. Whether we are directly involved or not, what higher education produces impacts everyone's life. If this subsector produces competent individuals and thinkers, the society will be a better place to live and vice-versa. Consequently, there is a need for concerted efforts from those who established these institutions and government on one hand, and local and international partners and the entire citizenry on other hand, to ensure total transformation in the HE subsector. One of the best ways to galvanize and enhance our concerted efforts is by performing to the optimum of our abilities in our respective assigned areas, as illustration, government providing its support and regulatory role, administrators designing innovative and appropriate ways to improve the institution and staff welfare, faculty and teaching staff performing their duties void of mediocrity and ineptitude, and students being studious with their academic work. In short, it is expedient to show patriotism in all our HE activities. As Holt (2000) puts it, quality education comes from making things happen, not letting things happen to you. This will assist a lot in bridging some of these challenges in the interest of fostering quality tertiary education. For Liberia, everyone needs to stand up to promote higher education, which is tied to long lasting sustainable economic growth and development of the nation as well as improving our individual lives.

#### **6. Conclusion**

From all indications, higher education is very pertinent and its crucial nature to every country cannot be over-emphasized. As a result, HE continues to be expanded in its governance, administrative structures, the curriculum, and the composition of the student body, intended to satisfy the access demand by the growing student population around the world. In Liberia, this expansion drive has increased tremendously from three HE institutions in the 1980s to thirty in 2012 (National Commission on Higher Education's Report, 2012). However, as the number of colleges and universities continues to increase in Liberia, the issue of quality remains an utmost concern. And so, aligning expansion and quality of higher education is extremely vital because the ability to undertake initiatives and be innovative basically relies on the quality of knowledge acquired. Accordingly, HE will make little or no impact if its products cannot fulfill their responsibilities because they lack the requisite skills to do so.

Against this background, it must be emphasized that balancing HE expansion and quality is not an option, but an obligation as HE is not a cosmetic or a window-dressing endeavor but one intended to imbue every necessary ingredient all-inclusive: value, excellence and quality aimed at fulfilling its true dogma of existence in all of its services and programs. As Alemu (2010) reminds us, expansion is as important as quality if the country has to benefit from its huge human resources; this is the only way HE can actualize its true objectives and purposes. As the nation's HE expansion continues, there is a need to deal with problems of infrastructure, equipment, facilities, libraries, laboratories, and buildings as well as brain drain of qualified professors and administrative personnel in order to promote quality. Ensuring quality higher education largely depends on the qualities of educational inputs: resources such as fiscal, physical, human, curricular, material/equipment) and throughputs: institutional governance that entails accountability, setting and implementing clear standards, and effectiveness (Alemu, 2010).

Economically, like in the cases of the UK, Taiwan and the US, Liberia's economy will benefit immensely with increased enrollments and graduation of more Liberians from colleges and universities as they will be in the position to control their nation's abundant natural resources including rubber, gold, diamonds, timber, iron ore, and now crude oil among others, thus facilitating the country's recovery drives. It will diminish the current manpower gaps and reduce expenditures on foreign experts; this can be converted towards having more Liberians receive adequate quality higher education to enable them to economically develop and move their country forward.

Finally, in order to align expansion and quality of higher education in Liberia, this paper has recommended for establishment of legal framework and quality management and enhancement body, prioritization of higher education, proportionate provision of subsidies to private institutions, establishment of professional development center for administrators and teaching staff as well as their incorporation in bilateral and multilateral partnership programs for capacity building, improving the welfare of HE staff, furnishing of libraries and laboratories, synchronizing and updating of the curriculum, and the need for concerted efforts as some of the measures to deal with quality challenges in Liberia's higher education subsector. In conclusion, for Liberia to succeed in its sustainable economic growth and development, balancing quality of higher education is inevitable, therefore, it

must be placed at the top of national development agenda to enable the nation's HE to produce quality graduates that will make long lasting impacts on the country and the world at large.

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