The Gambia’s Higher Education Reform Requirements: Sub-Systemic Interrogation

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Abstract:
The study extracted data from experts, one from each of the higher education systems in The Gambia, Nigeria and Kenya, and two from two universities in England. The data was analysed qualitatively through coding and the identification of themes. These themes are the requirements for higher education reform, extracted through an empirical literature review. Besides other activities and structures, the expert interviews identified the need to establish specialised offices in the identified Gambian institutions to ensure the system’s readiness for the reform process. These offices will include research and consultancy, shared financing through loan schemes, alumni engagement, internship and placements, quality assurance and enhancement of staff capacity, among other initiatives.

Keywords: reform requirements, university-industry linkages, cost-sharing, quality assurance.

Introduction
It is an open secret that more youth in Africa will soon be yearning for commensurable jobs, and it is for this reason that the education systems on the continent must be reformed to meet these impending demands (Chakroun et al., 2015) to avoid a likely persistent civil unrest.

The Gambia has already expressed this concern through several development policy initiatives: In 1994, the Gambia government implemented its Strategy on Poverty Reduction (SPA I); a programme that lacked a pro-poor and macro-economic framework advocacy (Government of The Gambia [GoTG], 2006). Later in 1996, the government developed a highly ambitious long-term aspiration for socio-economic advancement called ‘Vision 2020’ (GoTG, 1996). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) later recommended in 1999 the introduction of SPA II, also referred to as Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP I), implemented between 2003 and 2005. This programme preceded a second PRSP (GoTG, 2006), implemented between 2007 and 2011. During the period under these programmes, economic development remained a significant challenge, and the country registered a low human development index (HDI) (GoTG, 2006 & GoTG, 2011). The national development blueprint on Programme for Accelerated Growth and Employment (PAGE), 2011-2015, was launched in 2011, and in 2018, it launched the National Development Plan (NDP), 2018-2021. Like PRSP II, these two plans recognised that Vision 2020 echoes the need to transition from a low-income to a middle-income economy (GoTG, 2006 & GoTG, 2011, 2017).
In the policy documents referenced above, The Gambia government attempted to provide effective and efficient public service; and designed a reform programme for implementation, which centres on institutional capacity building and professionalism to implement these policies (GoTG, 2006). However, the institutional quality that should lean on adequate technical and administrative support to end a responsive higher education system continued to malign the country's competitiveness and perpetuated a lower economic development. Ultimately, there had been high attrition, ineffective training policies, and inadequate (and deficient) human capital in the public service (GoTG, 2006).

That notwithstanding, the government has observed the need to anchor institutional development for responsive, high productivity on human capital formation and utilisation (GoTG, 2017); and the education sector has been working in this direction. In fact, the country celebrated its first and only public university education through an extension programme in 1995, which later transitioned to a fully-fledged University of The Gambia (UTG) in 1999.

This institution (UTG) became the centre stage for producing the requisite human capital for the national development sectors. However, given its absorptive capacity and its specialisation and output efficiency (graduations), there have been growing concerns as to whether the institution would rise above the challenge of churning out the required human resources with the competencies needed to transform The Gambia into a middle-income economy. This concern dictated the need for a broadened higher education reform in the country, including establishing other programmes and higher learning institutions responsive to the aspiration for middle-income economic attainment. This is also the driving force for establishing a higher education ministry in 2007 (GoTG, 2011 & 2017).

As indicated in the Education Sector Policy, 2016-2030, the failure of policies is evidenced by the mismatch between graduates and the labour market requirements and the inequitable access to quality higher education (GoTG, 2016; GoTG, 2017). The reform programme in the NDP, 2018-2021, has implications for education quality, relevance, and inclusivity in The Gambia. As reported in the NDP and the Education Sector Policy (GoTG, 2016; GoTG, 2017), weak teaching skills and inadequate materials contributed to low education quality. Other factors included thin governance structures, inadequate staffing, unsustainable funding mechanisms, delineated curricula, and insufficient research capacity regarding personnel and infrastructure. Cognisant of this mishap, the NDP (GoTG, 2017) proposed a reform focusing on inclusive access to quality education and training, emphasising demand-side market-relevant skills training, scientific research, and technology development.

It is worth noting that an Observatory was earlier referred to in the 2004-2015 Education Policy, which was to serve as an advisory body that would help promote and maintain academic standards in education, learning and knowledge associated with the UTG or any other national higher learning institution. In its place, the National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Authority was established and mandated to regulate all quality aspects in public and private post-secondary education and training (GoTG, 2017).

Developing a national higher education system that adequately responds to workforce needs for national development requires enormous resources and sound policy review processes. Such reform must take a scientific approach. This paper identifies that as a success factor for a set of parameters through an expert review. In short, this is the country's readiness to create a higher education system that will play a central role in the transformation of The Gambia into a knowledge-based economy by having institutions and centres of excellence that will produce well-educated and skilled citizens with the requisite competencies to lead fulfilled lives and, compete nationally and globally; as well as help establish a coordinated scientific research and technology development skills system for advanced socio-economic development.
The study reviews these readiness variables, emphasising the Gambian context for adaptability, reliability and sustainability. The framework has a central focus on producing competent and responsive graduates and self-financed and autonomous institutions that will address the needs of the industry through educational provision, research, and technology development.

Generally, reforms in the public sector are carried out to achieve targeted goals and objectives, which mainly enhance and increase the system's quality being reformed to make it efficient and effective in serving the people. Education reform programmes are carried out to ensure the establishment of a relevant and quality higher education system that addresses the acute shortage of requisite and responsive human capital required for national socio-economic development. It identifies those variables to be measured to ensure that the broader objective of the reform is achieved.

**Literature – Empirical Review**

The Gambia's education system is synonymous with the British system; however, rethinking the systems in China, Viet Nam, India, Japan, Ethiopia, and Pakistan had impressive results.

In "Governance Reforms in Higher Education: A Study of Institutional Autonomy in Asian Countries", Varghese and Martin (2014) highlight the critical reform areas in some Asian countries as expansion, privatisation, marketisation, curricular review, research capacity enhancement, and university-industry linkages.

It was observed that the Chinese higher education reform was initially based on human resource requirements in the production sectors (Varghese & Martin, 2014). However, it later included decentralisation and its position within the country's economic reform of a marketisation philosophy. This required the Chinese to relax the central government's control of the institutions. They introduced cost-sharing (through fee payment, alumni contribution, and contract research) and the provision of competitive funding to boost research and development. However, the institutional evaluation was made compulsory, agencies were created along this line at central and regional levels, and the appointment of key personnel, such as the university president, still rests with the government (Varghese & Martin, 2014). This means the government chose to link its reform to the economic reform measures oriented toward a market economy, took off its hands-on control and acted as a facilitator. Also, in their educational democratisation process, the Chinese system built on the governance structure by using educational legislation to ensure effective policy implementation so that administrative Acts continue to serve as the core legislation (Muju & Nanzhao, 2007). Their higher education reform was deepened around employment demands with the understanding that standards of higher education quality are the social recognition and acceptance for graduates, meaning colleges and universities should consider the social demands to promote their graduates' employability and satisfy the demands of scientific innovation and industrialisation (Muju & Nanzhao, 2008). It was a restructuring of the governance system through solid legislation and relaxing the government's grip on its higher education institutions and encouraging curricular reviews to meet market demands.

The Vietnamese government focused its higher education reform on student enrolment and diversification, recasting the curriculum, emphasising university research, and selecting vital research institutes; while in Japan, it was an attempt to meet the requirements for a knowledge economy and showcased an introduction of self and external evaluations into the education system. Competitive funding was created to boost research and bring universities closer to industries (Varghese & Martin, 2014). The Japanese government set up an agency for accreditation and enforced that all higher education institutions should go through a certification process. Also, the corporatisation policy turned Japanese universities into corporations – naturally declining government funding – with new governance structures that allowed them to enjoy increased autonomy and
maintain state supervision by ensuring each university had a strategic plan approved by the responsible ministry; and more competition in funding was introduced (Varghese & Martin, 2014).

The Ethiopian higher education reform took on economic growth and poverty alleviation – consistent with a knowledge society and economy – and the government focused on privatisation, which later created the avenue for private investment and a surge in accredited private universities (Woldegiyorgis, 2014). At the same time, Ethiopia's government also worked on a massification programme, building more universities to capture comparatively high annual enrolment growth (Woldegiyorgis, 2014). With a proclamation on independence, some accountability mechanisms were recommended to use resources and adhere to quality assurance. At the same time, the government continued to monitor access, equity, quality and relevance, and efficient use of resources in the form of regulatory frameworks and system oversight agencies (Woldegiyorgis, 2014). Woldegiyorgis (2014) also notes that, as part of the government’s functions, a strategic centre was created to formulate visions and missions of higher education that would meet the human resource need of the government, more so, the education sector.

And in Pakistan, governance was reviewed along with the delineation of authority and accountability, regulation and enforcement of regulatory frameworks; partnerships; and monitoring and evaluation (Aziz et al., 2014). The reform identified the demand side, increasing the client's power (students, civil society and parents) and making institutions more autonomous.

Notably, higher education reform redefines the role of government in the overall governance of institutions (Girdwood, 1995). The fact that governments should support higher education institutions has always been clear, especially in bringing out external benefits of return on investment. Similar views focus on support for developing national scientific training, research infrastructure and industrial capacity. Governments' roles revolve around ensuring a coherent policy framework, reliance on incentives and other market-oriented instruments to implement policies, and increased autonomy management of higher education institutions (World Bank, 1994:5-14). By taking off their hands in the direction of these institutions, governments can still regulate quality, relevance and equity by instituting modalities of scholarship offers, loans and other resources to promote their policy agenda, such as bias in scientifically and technologically inclined students. This also does not deny the government from making higher education institutions accountable for their academic and management performances. Moreover, to encourage private higher education provision, governments, according to the World Bank (1994), could place emphasis on accreditation, oversight, and evaluation and allow universities to compete for research funding. They could also encourage allocating resources to higher education institutions using performance criteria such as disbursement-linked indicators (DLI).

In its pursuit of equity, higher education reform must not compromise quality. Nevertheless, there is a need for economic efficiency and social justice and stability, which are the hallmark of equity in higher education. As such, policymaking capacity should be strengthened alongside reform implementation, planning and financial management capabilities to enhance oversight bodies to analyse policies, evaluate funding requests, and monitor institutions' performance, among other things. At the same time, support could be focused on technical and financial assistance to enhance management capacity (World Bank, 1994).

It could be noted that where there is increased autonomy, there should be accountability measures, and countries do this by creating accreditation authorities and agencies. In this drive, most countries use the neoliberal philosophy of marketisation, which keeps the state from directly controlling the universities, but carefully monitors them externally and internally (Varghese & Martin, 2014). Generally, autonomy to universities has worked in many instances. Still, the unintended consequences
could be attributable to overcrowded classrooms and limited time for lecturers to engage in research, leading to ineffective teaching. Until now, the quality of teaching and learning has been questioned. Accordingly, legislation is needed to create room for innovation in meeting government needs, greater autonomy, more transparency, responsibility and accountability, capacity building, strategy development, and decision-making (Varghese & Martin, 2014).

Another angle of higher education reform is increased teaching and research quality, responsiveness to labour market demands, and equity (World Bank, 1994). In the first instance, this would mean ensuring that there is quality basic and secondary education and that the selection mode of students into higher education should be administered appropriately. Also, the system should have motivated teachers, a supportive professional culture, access to up-to-date information, and a robust monitoring and evaluation system to keep the institutions' eyes on the prize. The Chinese promoted these through collaboration between institutions of higher learning and the industry, facilitating knowledge and technology transfer with universities outside China.

The Indian government, however, adopted a learner-centred approach, which became more flexible in teacher recruitment. The government incentivised the profession through a tenure system that retained the best talents. The curriculum also introduced more industry-oriented programmes that promoted employability and entrepreneurial skills (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry [FICCI], 2013).

Pakistan had reasons to reform due to poor quality of teachers, low motivation of students, and unresponsive curricula leading to low enrolment rates; even vocational education was also characterised by a lack of marketable employment skills, making education one of the top problematic indicators for doing business in Pakistan (Aziz et al., 2014). More and more graduates had been churned out without job prospects, and this rising economic insecurity created anxiety for graduates and students. The media had become more active and spotlighted politicians who were not responding to the people's needs, placing the education sector under such an unpopular radar. When public expectations started rising uncontrollably, the government realised it had to eventually act on its reform agenda (Aziz et al., 2014). Now that the political environment leaned more steadily toward democracy, politicians had been forced to respond to the electorates' needs, as shown in the government's previous uprising and later democratic change. Therefore, the Pakistani education system aligned the problem and political streams in initiating the reform. The long-standing problem became a priority agenda due to the political change (Aziz et al., 2014). Similarly, it was believed that political interaction was required to drive policy change and its implementation (Aziz et al., 2014). When the right political skills were identified, these were used to exert politicians' will to make things work.

The Pakistani reform revolved around the technical issues of "designing the right curriculum and agreeing on the right policies" (Aziz et al., 2014). Especially on human capital for the education sector, the reform pointed out the strengthening of teacher training institutes, revisiting incentive structures by linking pay with performance, and the race to embrace acceptable practices in human resource management (Aziz et al., 2014). Curriculum issues generally stem from the content and delivery of the content (Aziz et al., 2014). In this domain, what had been considered acceptable practices were linking assessment to curriculum and not to textbooks, building on teacher quality, and expanding the curriculum to cover literacy and entrepreneurship (Aziz et al., 2014).

The Ethiopian reform on relevance aligned the curriculum with economic productivity. Teacher quality came out very clearly as the attributing factor to lack of significance and low quality and the relevance of the curriculum. It was then recommended that the curriculum be reviewed and updated with programmes of relevance, expand graduate-level programmes, and improve instructors' pedagogical competencies and equity (Woldegiyorgis, 2014).
Similarly, the government of China featured strong industry-academia collaborations and interactions. It synchronised the country's higher education system with the industry's requirements facilitated through competitive research grants and corporate endowments (Muju & Nanzhao, 2007).

In the Japanese case, the marriage between university professors and research is showcased strongly. The universities began to "receive stronger material and human resource support for basic research, in forms such as corporate sponsorship of professorships, the involvement of industry researchers at universities, and a more active exchange of manpower" (Poole, 2003). The reform focused on the changing requirement of the knowledge economy and established competitive funding to set up research centres and got closer to industry (Varghese & Martin, 2014).

In the case of responsiveness, it is observed that the reform should respond to the changing economic demands, and it was proposed that broader sector participation in production and innovation; industry-university cooperative research; corporate-sponsored internships; part-time academic appointments of professionals from productive sectors; and continuous education will go a long way in responding to the changing economic demands (World Bank, 1994).

Policy reforms within the remits of sustainability focus on mobilising more significant private financing, including donations, endowments from alumni and private industries, favourable tax regimes, running short-term courses and contract research and consultancies with the industry and development sectors (World Bank, 1994:5-14). Governments in Asia spend less per student yet achieve higher enrolment (the World Bank, 1994). This is attributed to lower average costs and the mobilisation of private funding for higher education. Public-private partnerships and other forms of financing, such as increased enrolment to generate more tuition fees, scholarships, and subsidies, have been promoted by governments in several reforms.

Another alternative in higher education financing, as argued by the World Bank (1994:5-14), is cost-sharing (such as loan schemes), which makes public institutions more responsive to market signals and makes students more careful in selecting programmes. However, most loan schemes failed due to heavily subsidised interest rates, default rates, and high administrative costs, even though schemes in Colombia and Canada succeeded (World Bank, 1994:5-14). The most credible higher education reforms have promoted cost-sharing mechanisms to reduce public spending. In this drive, public schools introduced loan schemes to be repaid from students' future earnings. Universities were encouraged to mobilise resources by marketising research and advisory services (Woldegiyorgis, 2014). In a separate instance, the World Bank introduced a 'block grant budget formula, giving institutions some financial autonomy and enabling them to invest in income-generating activities, which balanced their financial independence (Woldegiyorgis, 2014). The Bank promotes policy reforms on equitability, efficiency and higher quality with lower public cost, leading to a differentiated institutional structure and diversified resource base, emphasising private providers and private funding.

There is a justification that higher education has substantial returns on investment; however, there is little evidence that this should be the exclusive focus of countries' higher education reform. Primary and secondary education have higher returns concerning poverty reduction and equity. Still, the existential problem is that a percentage of these students at the lower education levels require adequate preparation at the higher education level to enhance productivity. By design, vis-a-vis the nature of aid flow, most developing countries could not prioritise higher education and lost to themselves in a vicious cycle of poverty, lower productivity and increased spending on imported services and products. Against this backdrop, higher education systems must reform to respond to market needs adequately.

This review places emphasis on governance, staffing, instructional quality and relevance,
research and development and financing. The need for internationalisation and collaboration with international universities and industries, especially for promoting research and development, kept re-surfacing. It was clear that the governance autonomy would not keep out governments altogether; there would still be room to make universities accountable. In the case of financial independence, it is worth noting that there is a high level of reduced participation of governments in financing higher education institutions. These governments opened avenues for cost-sharing, closer collaboration with the industry, and, in some instances, the provision of competitive research funding opportunities.

The assumption that the reforms addressed the problem of mismatch in all these countries is yet to be proven; thus, the need for the higher education systems to further review their reform processes and develop appropriate plans that will make their programmes much more responsive to the industry. The industry, increasingly, is playing a critical role in the recent curricula review processes; but that notwithstanding, the intensity of the exchange between the education providers and the industry may be the hallmark of the missing link.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method; an in-depth interview utilising national and international experts who helped identify the requirements or expand on the sub-systems of the reform. Five experts from the higher education sectors were selected to share their opinions, taking cues from the identified sub-systems. The intention was to use global imperatives in local settings. The area of study is the public higher education sector of The Gambia, focusing on the Ministry responsible for higher education and the public tertiary and higher education institutions under the Ministry’s direct supervision and the authority responsible for accreditation and quality assurance of post-secondary institutions, also a body under the supervision of the higher education ministry.

The population consisted of those from the higher education system. These are lecturers, researchers, personnel of higher education organisations at regional or international levels, and personnel of quality assurance and accreditation of higher learning institutions. The qualitative interview, as such, drew experts from all these categories, albeit conveniently. It was intended that their views would represent university lecturers and researchers who are in the business of setting up universities to acceptable standards. Their opinions should also represent those interacting with higher learning institutions through supervision, ensuring that quality and relevance determine their legitimate presence in the system. At the same time, those setting up regional organisations and bringing in higher education ministries and universities to ensure that they share good practices and bridge the gap between the industry and higher learning have been invited to participate in the process.

To address the study's objective, the researchers recruited a national expert who has a leading responsibility in the accreditation and quality assurance of tertiary and higher education institutions in The Gambia. The expert from East Africa is the senior executive of a continent-wide association on universities and polytechnics and is currently leading a reform; they both previously served in one of the tertiary institutions in The Gambia, which is also a principal focus of the current reform agenda. The expert from West Africa has been a senior executive of a university commission and the Africa Higher Education Centre of Excellence programme in one of the countries with the highest number of African universities. The researchers also recruited two other experts from two UK universities. These have both long-lasting experiences in the business of higher education and consultancy in the UK and managed to maintain a closer relationship with universities in Africa, The Gambia in particular, through consultancy and research.

The study derived its primary data from the interview that addressed its objective. The literature provided the secondary data, coded into themes of identified sub-systems to enable
analysis. Also, policy briefs, research materials and existing information have been reviewed.

A structured interview guide with open-ended questions represented the main instrument for analysing responses. The design of the questions comprised five main components meant to extract information from the respondents:

1) The governance questions probed the situation in The Gambia around the requirements to ensure that the governance structures of The Gambia’s higher education system have good practices as in other parts of the world.

2) Staffing questions exposed the Gambian situation. They probed on what would ensure that the staff are adequately motivated and have the competencies to deliver as those in excellent higher education systems in other parts of the world.

3) Instructional quality and relevance looked at the quality assurance systems to ensure that curricula (instructions) in public higher education institutions are delivered with quality and relevance and can match those in good performing universities in other parts of the world.

4) Research and development questions probed the relevant infrastructure and the success factors in ensuring that the public higher education infrastructure in The Gambia is considered adequately responsive.

5) Financing looked at mechanisms and structures that could be implemented to ensure sustainable financing of public higher in The Gambia.

Results and Discussion

Findings – Requirements for a Public Higher Education Reform

This objective sets to interrogate requirements adopted through a qualitative approach and considered the sub-systems of the Gambia public higher education system. Each expert interview took about fifty minutes, and records were later transcribed. Open-ended questions and semi-open-ended questions were asked. These opinions were checked against the literature and emphasised generality and applicability, thereby bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data from these experts. Open coding was deployed; first, to examine expert data, and the findings were later associated with related themes through the categorisation of issues which prominently or less prominently showed up. After coding, the responses were categorised by grouping the experts’ findings under the respective themes.

In short, the expert data went through selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, interpreting and explaining to find a meaningful whole of respective themes, thereby translating the discussions into a storyline. The generated categories cluster around the sub-systems featuring good practices, theories and commonalities with the Gambia’s higher education system.

Governance

The experts had been engaged to propose some sound governance system that could be considered viable and sustainable. While the experts discussed issues ensuring a sound governance sub-system, four points manifested prominence. These were: a) the relevance of strategy; b) understanding leadership role; c) control and accountability; and d) teamwork.

Three of the five experts interviewed stressed the relevance of strategic planning in the higher education system. In their submission, the other two acknowledged that leadership must plan to succeed. All five experts accepted that understanding leadership's role could be as important as running a higher education system and controlling the employees and the institution's activities, thus ensuring accountability. Two experts also spoke favourably about teamwork.
Table 1. Analysis of Governance Data

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sample Excerpts Comments on Themes</th>
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| Relevance of strategy (3rd, 4th, & 5th Experts) | • So, developing the principles and then trying them out before they are institutionalised is very important.  
• Make sure there is a good strategic plan, and people know where the university is now, where it will be in 3 years, in 5 years, and 15 years. |
| Understanding of Leadership Role (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, & 5th Experts) | • So, if you have good leadership, you can ensure that there are good governance and a good accounting body that oversees the activities and holds the whole institution accountable.  
• So, when you are recruiting a VC, it is important that you have somebody who is very good at selling the institution; and mobilising resources as well and managing people. |
| Control, Accountability (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th Experts) | • Advice on what they can do and what they cannot do, level of intervention, and interface with other government structures.  
• Have clear job descriptions that hold everybody accountable, annual appraisals.  
• 60% of the budget should be allocated to academic ventures. |
| Teamwork among leadership (4th & 5th Experts) | • At the university level, have governance that is flexible enough to encourage co-creation, co-innovation, co-solution of problems, and co-identification of problems but also room for people to experiment.  
• There must very clear process, a very objective process to select the team who are there, because this is quality we are looking at and excellence. |

Source: Field Work (2020)

Staffing

Almost all the experts reiterated issues of staff benefits and competencies. Different benefit packages had been proposed, but virtually all the experts narrowed down on re-training. The assumption was that there should be a minimum qualification to teach in a university, but such qualifications do not make great teachers. There is a need for professional training. The experts also talked about the need to have the staff stay on the job, and this, according to almost all of them, could be related to money and higher motivational schemes such as housing. In the interviews, experts would refer to appreciation and respect for the staff, either from colleagues or the leadership. See the table below.

Table 2. Analysis of Staffing Data

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| Benefits - Motivation (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, & 5th Experts) | • Put in place a good working environment.  
• Could you imagine as a university lecturer, given a built house and told once you retire with the university, you become the owner; have a car to mobile, those are the basic things you need ...  
• Right, you know motivation is key; this is a challenge that most African countries encounter; you need highly competent people, but the salaries are not that attractive to retain them. |
| Capacity of Staff (1st, 2nd, 4th, & 5th Experts) | • Institutions in the Gambia are grabbing to get up because some key skills are needed.  
• Senior people to coach junior people.  
• In the UK, normally, you need a PhD, a teaching qualification, and about four publications to teach in a university; some may not, but you need a base mark. |
| Respect and Appreciation (1st Expert) | • You also need to earn the confidence of the staff.  
• Rules are respected, and good grievance redress mechanisms. |

Source: Field Work (2020).
Instructional Quality and Relevance

There are indications that quality assurance, resource provision, and staff competencies in the public tertiary and higher education institutions in The Gambia have fallen below the required standards. Against this backdrop, the interview looked at acceptable practices in other parts of the world and allowed the experts to make propositions of acceptable good practices for the Gambia's higher education reform.

Three experts emphasised and talked at length about quality assurance and accreditation of higher education programmes. Two others emphasised staff competence in teaching and the ability to conduct research. Teaching and learning materials gained the attention of all five experts. One expert referred to the absence of essential tools such as microscopes and access to e-journals and went further to swipe at management's inability to maintain expensive tools. The issue of internship and employability also surfaced extensively as a theme and got the attention of four experts. However, the fifth expert referred to both internship and employability, but with different emphasis than the other experts. See the table below.

Table 3: Analysis of Instructional Quality and Relevance Data

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sample Expert Comments on Themes</th>
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| Quality Assurance / Accreditation (1st, 3rd & 5th Experts) | • Check programme by programme; a particular course requires a certain amount of course requirements (theory, labs, and industrial attachment).  
• There is a straightforward programme handbook. Students will anonymously feedback their teachers.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Qualified Staff (4th & 5th Experts)                | • At the barest minimum, there is a recommendation; some universities have that, at minimum, you should be lecturing when you are doing your PhD, and then you are a teaching assistant.  
• Your researchers, where are they getting the latest journals? You could see that a lot of the publications are moving with e-books and e-access.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Teaching & Learning Resources (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th Expert) | • You cannot have a good university where you do not have the basic equipment; you want students to operate at the global level.  
• When they come, they expect to see competent lecturers; they expect to see a beautiful environment, a well-equipped library, teaching and research laboratories, etc.  
• Laboratories; are they up to date? library, even electronic libraries, what kind of content they have …                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Internship & Employability (1st, 2nd, 4th & 5th Expert) | • But also, having showcases so that you bring employers to come and check our talent doing 3rd-year projects that are exhibited for people.  
• They can decide to create a business as entrepreneurs develop their own career paths if they don't want to be employed.  
• Look at the needs of the labour market, jobs for the future                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

Source: Field Work (2020).

Research and Development

All the experts emphasised research and development regulations, and some reported the presence of these regulations in their respective institutions. Again, all five experts insisted on having this as a core pillar in the transformation process. Four experts emphasised the need for institutional research competence, and three noted the need for research funding. The experts also displayed the link between research funding and higher education financing and research. Accordingly, the promotion of research would create excellence in teaching. It motivates the staff and helps keep the institution’s cash liquidity and enables it to finance its activities. They also identified the link between the curriculum and its quality, arguing that research should inform university teaching. See the table below.
### Table 4. Analysis of Research and Development Data

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<th>Sample Expert Comments on Themes</th>
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| **R&D Regulations** (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th Experts) | • Emphasis should be on research that targets local development issues and addresses local peculiar challenges.  
• You can develop patents; you can develop products; you can develop processes.                                                                                      |
| **Staff Research Competence** (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th Experts) | • I lecture… I am also doing research in this area. So, I am an active researcher; my research goes into my teaching; you have some lecturers teaching, but they just cite other people nonstop because they don't have their own research materials in these areas.  
• Even if you are not a professor but a lecturer of some level, you need to bring in research if you want a promotion.                                                                 |
| **Institutional Research competence** (2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th Experts) | • If UTG, MDI or Gambia College sets up its research unit and can use its staff and motivate them, with MRC, the UN.  
• R&D should normally drive the university; it is about generating knowledge; it is about commoditising what has been discovered in the research.                                                                 |
| **Research Funding** (1st, 4th & 5th Experts) | • Funding needs to be consistent.  
• Also, a particular income, percentage of the income must come from research. You need to have the journals; you need to have a publishing press.  
• A big part of innovation is informed by research, which is R&D now.                                                                                                                                 |
Discussion of Findings

Governance

The interview data suggests that higher education reforms must prioritise the higher education system’s governance structure. Consequently, it would be ideal for The Gambia to revisit its governance structure and ensure that the right structures are put in place. As reported in the literature on its educational democratisation, China built on the governance structure through several legislations to ensure effective policy implementation (Muju & Nanzhao, 2007).

One expert said:

\textit{At the university level, have governance that is flexible enough to encourage co-creation, co-innovation, co-solution of problems, and co-identification of problems but also room for people to experiment.}

Another lamented the fact that:

\textit{Governance is not only about the aspirational but also about the concrete steps, the monitoring, the mechanisms in place to ensure good governance.}

The research, therefore, identified the need to have the institutions develop strategic plans derived from those prescribed at the national level and have plans for building leadership capacity, accountability, and regulations on financing, as well as research and staff development.

Staffing

The expert discussions around staffing centred on the need to motivate the staff to increase retention. As the competition for competent staff grows globally, higher education reforms focus on attracting the best brains, as in the case of the countries herein used as cases. They experienced brain drain, but their universities worked on brain-gain by encouraging their professionals in the diaspora to come back. As such, substantive use of incentives is the deciding factor.

During the interviews, three of the experts remarkably familiar with the higher education landscape of The Gambia cited the poor incentivised staff conditions. This could be verified in Gambia's development plan (NDP, 2018-2021) and other education sector policy documents. Two of the interviewees phrased it differently, thus:

\textit{You have to pay or be able to produce high wages and then establish a career pattern.}

And,

\textit{Right, you know motivation is key; this is a challenge that most African countries encounter; you need highly competent people, but the salaries are not that attractive to retain them.}

From the numerous suggestions of these experts, and in line with the literature as to what happened in already reformed higher education systems, there is the need to prioritise staff training and development specific to professional-pedagogical skilling, research and consultancy, as well as training to acquire higher degrees (a drawback in most higher education institutions in the Gambia). This will give them the skills that match the desired acumen in the higher education community.

Instructional Quality and Relevance

Higher education reform must consider and emphasise programmes that should earn graduates the jobs and give them the opportunities to become entrepreneurial since commensurable jobs are dwindling. Moreover, without accredited programmes due to a lack of qualified personnel, adequate teaching and learning resources and an absence of regulated internships, how could the Gambia's higher education system claim a place in the global teaching and research excellence?

One of the experts proposed a way out of the problem:

\textit{You are at zero programme accreditation; by the time you get to two years, we want all the programmes accredited. Quality is nothing less than meeting customer expectations, meeting regulatory requirements, and then indirectly; you serve the employers; they are buyers of your product, the students. When they (students) come,
they expect to see competent lecturers; they expect to see a beautiful environment, a well-equipped library, teaching and research laboratories, etc. Those are the expectations. Now when you provide those expectations, this is a quality university.

On the issue of employability, the experts all agreed that the involvement of the industry is vital. Some cautioned that we should develop curricula that will meet the demand for future jobs. Again, one of the experts expressed this squarely:

_We are talking about the African environment; how do we develop… train students who are able to do that, which colonialism has failed in doing? You cannot have a good university where you do not have the basic equipment; you want students to operate at the global level._

The research took cues from the experts' concerns and identified many provisions that should take centre stage in the reform process. The institutions must be capacitated with quality assurance units, and the national authority responsible for supervision must be strengthened. They should have more competent staff and must develop internship and entrepreneurship programmes; as well as provide state-of-the-art teaching and learning resources for higher learning excellence.

**Research and Development**

The absence of research and development regulations indicates a lack of a robust research and development system in The Gambia. One expert discussed access to research findings, and another discussed the need to develop patents and restrictions governing research services. Again, reports in the national documents (GoTG, 2016, 2017) indicate thin research governance structures and low research capacity, both in the personnel and the infrastructure, contributing to poor quality education in our tertiary and higher education institutions. The World Bank report advocates, through empirical findings, the need to redefine governments' role in research spending (World Bank, 2014). An expert, along this line, said:

_You need a good governance structure that provides the institutional environment; it sets you up to do high-quality research. You can develop patents; you can develop products; you can develop processes._

This paper cited that the Japanese higher education reform enabled the professors to take a particular liking toward research, and later the universities started receiving support for basic research (Poole, 2003). The experts considered it pertinent for anyone in the higher education system to have competence; some even argued that you could not teach in a university without those competences. This aligns with the assertion that higher education reform has another angle: increased quality teaching and research, increased responsiveness to labour market demands and increased equity (World Bank, 2014). An expert presented this argument; thus:

_You have some lecturers teaching, but they cite other people nonstop because they don’t have their research materials in these areas. Even if you are not a professor but a lecturer of some level, you need to research if you want a promotion._

Institutional research competence and funding are linked to lecturers' capacity to do research. The Chinese model provided competitive funding to boost research and development, as reported in Varghese & Martin (2014). Again, recent reforms in the higher education sector brought human capital formation closer to the industry's demands and placed industry and research at the centre of higher education (World Bank, 2014).

**Financing**

Higher education reforms should respond to changing economic demands. As proposed by experts and literature, this would encourage broader sector participation in production and innovation, industry-university corporative research, corporate-sponsored internship, and part-time academic appointments (World Bank, 1994). An expert has this to say:

_But also, are there ways in which income can be generated? I think there are lots of ways to generate revenue through research and consultancy and training services. You can have big …, whether it is UN or WHO, or …, they have got a lot of_
funding out there, but have we got an office? Like when you come to my university, we have got an office that handles all research matters. The university must make at least 50% profit, and that goes into the 'central pot' of the university.

It eventually became more apparent that Gambia’s higher education reform must encourage the use of resources to develop a sector’s financing model. This should include a robust university-industry linkage, short-term courses for public and private institutions, and delving deeper into more applied research and consultancy, prioritising local needs. A student loan scheme should also be piloted. Two experts put it, thus:

*Partnership with industry could be harnessed to generate income as well as reduce costs regarding the use of their resources (human and physical).*

*Universities cannot rely on subvention; they should be innovative enough and come up with programmes that people want.*

Higher education focuses on increased education quality, as the World Bank (1994) alluded to. Therefore, the sector must focus on increased responsiveness to the labour market demands. That hope cannot be lost because the government has not shown signs of spending more than little. Therefore, it is hoped that, like Ethiopia’s case (Woldegiyorgis, 2014), The Gambia government adopts a cost-sharing mechanisms with students, the industry and other stakeholders. Reforms can only be successful if the government is not seen as a significant player in the business.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Many governments conducted reforms in various parts of the world, and even in The Gambia, literature identified numerous attempts at changing the *status quo* by the government. Therefore, this research drew experiences from countries and lessons from the Gambia government’s numerous attempts to reform its higher education system. For this reason, the paper reviewed the literature to engage experts to help propose good practices for the Gambia’s higher education reform.

It could be recalled that requirements for higher education reform had been discussed earlier and identified as those policy indications captured in the NDP 2018-2021, best practices in selected higher education systems, and the sector’s goals, as captured in the policies and strategies. These goals were opened to discussion during the expert interviews, and the findings aligned with indications of policy documents.

Conclusively, governance issues could be addressed by ensuring that institutions develop strategic plans with indicative costs. The governance sub-system should also develop regulations on crucial issues such as scholarships and loan schemes, internships, entrepreneurship, quality assurance and general training and development of staff of these institutions. Aside from the development of appropriate regulations, there should be regular training of leadership bodies to understand their roles and responsibilities and align the activities of the institutions with the growing trends in the global higher education landscape.

The issue of staffing has been considered critical. For the staff to do their job professionally and ensure quality delivery, academic staff must be trained to doctoral degree level in the relevant areas. In addition, there is a need to run short-term programmes on pedagogy/andragogy. Commonly, staff in higher education do not have the minimum pedagogical qualification. Other developmental or motivational programmes could be phased in the reform implementation. Staff members must be motivated adequately to do their work effectively and efficiently. Incentive packages should include housing and mobility. The Gambia Social Security and Housing Corporation has been active and could collaborate with the system to provide housing for staff members in public higher education institutions.

The expert discussions on instructional quality and relevance concluded with the establishment of quality assurance units in the institutions and internship and entrepreneurship offices. There is a need to subscribe to online peer-reviewed
journals to enable staff with current and relevant information for teaching and research. Also, institutions must have good internet facilities for staff and students. The laboratories and the lecture rooms must be equipped with state-of-the-art instructional materials. Government must increase the scholarship allocation to students in the STEM areas. Quality has been a significant issue in the higher education landscape. This has a bearing on many related factors. NAQAA should be strengthened in terms of capacity to execute its quality assurance and programme accreditation function. At the level of institutions, quality assurance units should be set up to ensure compliance with standards.

Institutional research and development ensure the viability of programmes in higher education and should be the centrepiece of any reform process. Therefore, it has been concluded that institutions should have established research and consultancy units and a competitive research fund. Institutional staff should also be trained on research methodology and have peer-review and ethical panels shown to help coordinate research and development. First, MoHERST should develop a research policy and set up ethical committees. There should be more funding for research, and research methodology education should be introduced as low as the undergraduate level. Teaching methodologies should be researched to capture the best pedagogical strategies.

The financing reform of higher education programmes should ensure industry-university collaboration. The alumni, donations and endowment offices have been cited as possible enablers of sustainable financing mechanisms, alongside subventions from the government. It is also required that the government sets up scholarships and loan schemes for needy and deserving students. There must be other means of funding aside from subventions from the government. Ministries, departments and agencies, and the private sector should collaborate on paid placements. The government must also develop loan schemes as a form of cost-sharing.

It is time the country reforms its higher education system to become more responsive to the needs of the industry. The old ways only cause us valuable resources at the expense of efficiency and effectiveness in the higher education system. A nation's seriousness in its human capital formation determines its resolve to escape poverty and decadence.

References


