

Liberia's Higher Education: An Agenda for Virtual and Distance Education in Urban and Rural Settings

by

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Abstract

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The University Admission Examinations (UAE) in 2013 showed that high school graduates in Liberia did not meet required standards. This was due to poor quality of secondary education in Liberia, characterized by a high illiteracy rate of 62% and low quality of education at the secondary and tertiary levels. In order to deal with these issues and find solutions to other social problems, Liberia needs to develop and enforce new sets of policies that will facilitate education and quality improvement.

This study examines Liberia's education system and policies particularly in higher education. The author reviews policy documents of the Liberian government, the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations, and scholarly literature to find out what approaches could benefit the Liberian nation currently recovering from 14 years of civil war and devastation.

One of the main findings is that Virtual and Distance Education can be an asset to Liberia's higher education system, if and only if, certain requirements are fulfilled. Distance education should be utilized more often so that people from rural and remote regions can access advanced education. Although traditional forms of education are still valuable and must be strengthened, distance education is proven to be convenient, accessible, effective and efficient.

The Government of Liberia and its international partners need to work closely to fulfill the goals of Education for all, as this is essential to raising literacy rates across the country and accomplishing post-conflict reconstruction in Liberia. Drawing on experiences of other African nations, a set of recommendations is proposed to assist in policy formulation, with regards to quality and accessible higher education, and implementation of educational reforms in Liberia.

Key words: higher education, distance education, Liberia, rural areas, education, policy

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Dedication

To my father,

Martin Himie V. S. T. S. Hardy

For his love for his family and his homeland – Liberia

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

The nation of Liberia meaning “land of the free” or “land of liberty” has almost never come close to living up to the true meaning of its name. Perhaps it was because the name was only meaningful to those who chose it. Although Liberia became a free land for the freed African American slaves from the United States (U.S.) that settled there in 1822, it was certainly not for the Indigenous Africans who were already on the land. This was because of the strange relationship that developed between the two groups. The Indigenous Africans experienced numerous cases of inequality, injustice and unfair treatments at the hands of the freed slaves.

Indigenous Africans were excluded from citizenship and were denied a formal education. Even though Indigenous Africans were intelligent and hardworking people, the lack of formal education caused a high illiteracy rate among them. Discrimination against the Indigenous Africans led to the downfall of a nation with so much potential. In my view, if education had been valued from the day Liberia became a recognizable or a so-called “independent” nation in 1847, it would have realistically become a “land of the free”. Understanding the history of Liberia brings the issues discussed in this study into perspective.

The focus of this study is to examine Liberia’s education system, analyze its educational policies particularly in higher education, discuss the impact of the 14 year civil war on the education system, and explore the use of virtual and distance education (VDE) in selected urban and rural areas. VDE is a method of learning that can provide Liberians with a sustainable value-centered advanced educational opportunity.

Research Problem

The education system in Liberia has been described as appalling and of poor quality (All Africa, 2013; Johnston, 1969; Nelson, 1985; UNESCO, 2012). Compared to other African nations in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the Liberian national budget allocations to the education sector remain the lowest, at 14% (UNESCO, 2012). Yet the Liberian government strongly promotes “Right to Education Projects” and advocates for the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), “Education for all” (EFA) ideology. Currently, the government’s major focus is to improve basic education in Liberia. This means that, higher education (HE) and adult education (AE) are of minimal priority. Considering these issues, the following questions arise: How can the Liberian government improve the education system and reduce the illiteracy rate in Liberia? With regards to HE, what other models of learning can the government explore to serve both urban and rural areas?

It is in response to these questions that the research problem focuses on exploring the use of Virtual and Distance Education in selected urban and rural higher education institutions (HEIs) in Liberia. Research has shown how effective and efficient distance education has been in other parts of SSA (AVU, 2014; Hicks, 2007; Moyo, 2003; UNISA, 2014). In order for Liberia to realize the EFA goals and the goals of its HE policies, alternatives to higher education must be investigated. I propose exploring VDE.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand, examine and analyze Liberia’s education system, its education policies particularly in relation to higher education, and the impact of the civil war on the Liberian education system. Researchers have proposed distance education for

Sub-Saharan Africa - hence I hope to explore virtual and distance model of learning for Liberia's HE system in urban and rural areas, as a means to ensure education is accessible to all Liberians.

Definition of Terms

To assist the readers' understanding of this qualitative study, a list of terms and its definitions are provided below:

Americo-Liberian – Is a term used for “designated descendants of Liberia's early settlers from the Western Hemisphere, particularly the United States, and their descendants. Although still used by most Liberians, the designation no longer has official governmental approval and is regarded as expressing an obsolete and divisive concept” (Nelson, 1985, p. 323).

American Colonization Society (ACS) – “Formally, the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color [sic] in the United States was founded in Washington, D.C.” With support from the United States Government, “its purpose was to sponsor the settlement of “free persons of color” [sic] in Africa” (Nelson, 1985, p. 8).

Congoes – Is a term used to describe rescued Africans who “landed in Liberia from slave ships captured during the suppression of the slave trade in the nineteenth century” (Nelson, 1985, p. 323).

Distance Education (DE) – Is defined as “institutionally based, formal education, where the learning group is separated and where interactive technologies are used to unite the learning group” (Simonson & Schlosser, 2000, p. 1). This term is used interchangeably with electronic learning (e-learning), which encompasses virtual education (VE), distance education (DE) or distance learning, virtual and distance education (VDE), or online learning.

Formal Education - “corresponds to a systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology” (Dib, 1988, p. 1).

Indigenous Liberians – Also known as the Indigenous Africans, were those Africans “living in the area [Liberia]” before the arrival of the African-American freed slaves, their descendants and the Congoes (Nelson, 1985, p. 101).

Informal Education – “is a spontaneous process of helping people to learn. Its purpose is to cultivate communities, associations and relationships that make for human flourishing” (Infed.org, 2015, p. 1).

Significance of the Study

Personal significance. Pursuing this study is a way I can give back to my country, which is very near and dear to my heart. Fleeing the civil war with my family in the late 1989, witnessing the destruction of schools and necessary social amenities, and not being able to return and partake in the rebuilding process of my country have always haunted me. It was actually my encounter with other Liberians outside my social niche that opened my eyes to the high illiteracy rate among Liberians, especially those from rural areas. I have chosen to focus on higher education for two reasons: (1) I strongly believe that higher education is the key to Liberia’s success and (2) the Government of Liberia (GOL), and its local and international partners are dedicated to improving primary and secondary education in Liberia thereby leaving minimal support for HE. In addition to the traditional model of learning (learning in the classroom) and basic life skills (training at home), exploring other models of learning can be fundamental to ensuring formal education is accessible to all Liberians. Having said that, I feel there is an urgent

need to explore distance education at the tertiary level in selected urban and rural areas in Liberia. This will help reduce the illiteracy rate and ensure education accessibility, especially in the rural areas.

Educational significance. As a researcher, it is my hope that the findings of this study may be useful to the Liberian government and educators in terms of formulating, strengthening and implementing national HE policies. The importance of formulating and implementing national HE policies nurtures national development particularly in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. In support of strong governance and leadership in Liberia, this study will narrow the gap between policy and practice thereby allowing for positive social change. Revealing the shortcomings in the Liberia's HE system will engage policy makers, educators and students to be a part of the solution to HE problems facing the nation. Reducing the illiteracy rate in Liberia will be an asset to the nation. The findings will help advocate and promote UNESCO "Education for All" in both urban and rural settings. International researchers and/or other post-conflict nations in Africa can benefit from the knowledge in terms of how to launch VDE programs and what is required to support an effective and efficient VDE program in Africa's HEIs.

Professional significance. Research on Virtual and Distance Education in SSA is enormous, but research on this subject matter specific to Liberia is limited. This study will add to the literature on VDE in SSA and will inspire other researchers to consider research problems specific to Liberia. Considering the fact that presently HE in Liberia is of less priority to the government, it is my hope that this study will inspire scholars in the field of HE to continue the research on HE in Liberia. For researchers, educators and individuals in leadership capacity, this study brings into perspective the historical implications and the impact of the 14 years of civil war on Liberia's education system. This study generates the awareness to all professionals that

conflict affects everyone. In the case of Liberia, foreign investors, business people, students, teachers and every form of profession were all brutally affected by the civil war. The need for a proactive and engaging approach to EFA is eminent.

Historical Background

Liberia, known as Africa's first republic can be found on the west coast of the continent of Africa. It was founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society (ACS) to settle descendants of freed African American slaves. Approximately 15,000 African American slaves were voluntarily relocated to the colony called Monrovia (named after the American president at the time – James Monroe). The country became a free and independent Republic of Liberia in 1847 (Roberts et al., 1964). The name Liberia was chosen from the Latin word “*Liber*” meaning, “Free” and “*ia*” meaning, “Place”. The African American freed slaves called their colony Liberia - “Land of the Free” or “Land of Liberty”.

Between 1822 and 1847 Liberia was governed by the U.S. government agency ACS, and provided periodic moral support but very minimal technical and material assistance (Nelson, 1985; Roberts et al., 1964). At the time, the U.S. government was preoccupied with protecting Liberia from neighboring European interests; and was also engrossed in conflicts with the Indigenous Africans (Maugham, 1969; Oritsejafor, 2009; Roberts et al., 1964). ACS members who accompanied the freed slaves to Liberia were representatives of the U.S. government. Both ACS representatives and the U.S. government chose to ignore the relationship of dominance that developed between the freed slaves and the Indigenous Africans.

Descendants of the freed slaves from America, and Africans rescued from intercepted slave ships repatriated to Liberia, are referred to as the Americo-Liberians and Congoes

respectively. The Americo-Liberians, Congoes and non-Liberians made up only 5% of the population, but together they created a stark divide between themselves and the Indigenous Africans (Roberts et al., 1964). Despite their low representation in Liberia, the Americo-Liberians and the Congoes historically dominated as the intellectual and ruling class. The Indigenous Africans (commonly referred to as the country people or Indigenous Liberians) made up 95% of the population, and consisted of 16 different ethnic groups (Maugham, 1969; Nelson, 1985; Roberts, 1964). Upon independence in 1847, the Americo-Liberians cut ties with the U.S. and on their own had to deal with the hostility that existed between themselves and the Indigenous Africans. Some of the issues that caused hostility between the two groups were issues of land tenure system, land ownership, cultural hostility and misunderstanding (Western values versus African cultures). The dealings of slave trade between the coastal Africans and the Westerners, was another major issue Americo-Liberians had with the Indigenous Africans (Maugham, 1969; Oritsejafor, 2009). Eventually, Americo-Liberians were able to stop slave trading along the Liberian coast.

The Americo-Liberians ruled Liberia from 1846 to 1980, and subjected the Indigenous Africans to unfair treatments such as denying them formal education, imposing taxes without representation, denying them social equity, right to citizenship and property ownership. There was even an apprenticeship program where Indigenous African youth stayed with Americo-Liberian families until they were of a certain age. Indigenous Africans were considered subjects and mere property of the state (Nelson, 1985). The Liberian Commonwealth Constitution of 1839 limited privileges of citizenship to Americo-Liberians and the Congoes. An article in the Constitution of 1847 distinguished between the rights of citizens and indigenous Africans (Nelson, 1985). Up until the 1940s, Indigenous Africans were not considered citizens of Liberia.

For many years, these rigid policies and practices created a problematic relationship between the two groups. Consequently, this led to the political unrest in 1980 and a full-blown destructive and brutal civil war in December of 1989 (Oritsejafor, 2009).

Of all the maltreatments and labor exploitations allotted to the Indigenous Africans by the Americo-Liberian leadership, the most unfortunate harm was denying Indigenous Africans (or 95% of the population) a formal education. At the time, public education in Liberia was of poor quality, and government expenditures on education were low compared to other West African nations (Harold, 1985). The argument was that other West African nations were under colonial rule, and that the ruling elite needed to teach colonial values to their colonies. Instructional materials imported from the U.S. had little relevance for life in Liberia. The sheer lack of teaching materials, labs for science, and class textbooks contributed to a poor quality education in Liberia (Harold, 1985). Initially, Indigenous Africans did not want to associate with the Americo-Liberians and were comfortable with an informal education system (teaching in the home), but, later, a large section of Indigenous Africans became eager to learn, eager for a formal education and the advantages associated with formal education (Maugham, 1969). Even though at the time, Liberia needed more agricultural and manual laborers, denying a large percentage of the population formal education was unfathomable.

What baffles me most about the Americo-Liberians oppressive rule over the Indigenous Africans is that, the same maltreatment they and their forefathers once rebelled against in the U.S. before they were repatriated to Liberia, was inflicted on the Indigenous African. Is this kind of oppressive treatment different from what they rebelled against as slaves in the U.S.? And how can the Americo-Liberians fight to abolish slavery on the coast only later to act as “slave masters”? As much as I would like to understand that Americo-Liberians blamed Indigenous

Africans for their extremely difficult past in the U.S., it still does not justify the way they treated the Indigenous Africans. That said, Indigenous African chiefs should have been more interested in negotiating a better and fairer deal for the people rather than interested in selling their lands and their peoples. As Harold (1985) explains, “the chiefs with who the colonization societies had dealt did not have authority to dispose of the land and probably did not realize the consequences of their action in agreeing to sell it” (p. 27). Consequently, the current educational predicaments Liberia faces can be traced to the actions of both Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians.

Although tensions over the years ceased quite a bit due to intermarriages between Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians, the ripple effect from the past and the high illiteracy rate among Indigenous Liberians set the nation on a time bomb ready to explode (Mgbeoji, 2003). In 1980, a group of disgruntled Indigenous Liberians overthrew the Tolbert government and established a government under the leadership of President Samuel Doe. In December of 1989, Charles Taylor an Americo-Liberian waged war on Doe’s government for mismanagement of government funds and wrongdoings. This civil war lasted for 14 years and education came to a standstill. The massive destruction rendered the nation one of the poorest in Africa.

Much of this agony could have been avoided had Americo-Liberians fostered a just and inclusive society. But does that mean Liberians cannot move past this agony? It is high time Liberians saw themselves as one people and work together to build a prosperous and literate society. This is somewhat evident in the fact that the terms Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians are no longer officially used, but as to how people see each other is another question. Presently, citizens of Liberia are known as Liberians.

The current Government of Liberia (GOL) under President Sirleaf's leadership is advocating for education for all Liberians and gender equity in education. Some of the priorities of the current government and its local and international partners are to provide free basic and junior secondary education to all school-age children; better regulate and monitor higher education while ensuring improvement in quality and relevance in programs; provision of competent, well qualified and motivated teachers for all institutions in Liberia; and technical vocational education and training (TVET) for youth and adults (UNESCO Report, 2007). The written ideas in this plan are honorable, but the reality is that implementation is slow due to the lack of teaching staff, infrastructures, funding, and research materials for education in Liberia specifically higher education. At present, the GOL main focus is on primary and secondary education (ESP, 2010) while less attention is given to the HE system.

It is in response to this situation in Liberia and other parts of SSA that I have decided to explore Virtual and Distance Education (also known as electronic learning or e-learning) as a means to combat the inaccessibility of HE especially in the rural areas. Distance learning higher education institutions such as the African Virtual University (AVU), Commonwealth of Learning (COL), University of Victoria Early Childhood Development Virtual University (UVic ECDVU) and various e-learning programs in universities across SSA, are evidence of the need for this model of learning. My questions include: Is Virtual and Distance Education an effective model of learning for advanced education in Liberia? And could it promote EFA in urban and rural Liberia? This study explores these questions and provides recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

In my quest to understand Liberia's education system and policies particularly in higher education (HE), I realized that an understanding of the history and the impact of colonization is

the first step. Colonization has much to do with the current predicaments facing the education system in Liberia, most especially HE. Adopting the social constructivist worldview proposed by Creswell (2014), my understanding of the interaction among Liberians, as well as my personal, cultural and historical experience in Liberia, will enhance my deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of education in Liberia. Understanding Liberia's educational policies will enhance my ability to explore and recommend other models of learning as an additional educational tool for effective use in urban and rural settings.

Employing the theoretical framework of Colonialism, Postcolonialism and Decolonizing methodologies, I attempt to explain the following: the role colonization played in shaping the education system in Liberia; education in postcolonial Liberia; how necessary it is for Liberians to decolonize their assumptions about each other; and the need for Liberians to focus on building the nation as one people. Colonialism, Postcolonialism and Decolonizing methodologies address the impact of the colonial rule on the social and educational system of the colonized, critiquing colonization through the lens of postcolonial theory, and the need for decolonization of both the colonizers and the colonized (Loomba, 2005; Ravi, Lingard & Lavia, 2006; Smith, 1999; Chinn, 2007). In building a progressive and proactive education system in Liberia, both Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians must question the assumptions of colonization and be open to different worldviews and ways of knowing. As Mgbeoji reminds us, "it was natural to reduce colonialism to a white-against-black paradigm" (2003, p. 10), but in the case of Liberia, colonialism was a black-against-black paradigm. Colonialism/Postcolonialism and Decolonizing methodologies are befitting of any nation that experienced colonial dominance regardless of the race of the oppressors.

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, colonialism is the practice of domination and subjugation, usually political and economic control, of one group over another (2012). In response to colonialism and the period after colonization, postcolonial theory emerged mostly to critique the assumptions of colonization. Postcolonialism is a “critical theoretical approach in literary and cultural studies that designates a politics of transformational resistance to unjust and unequal forms of colonial practices” (James, n.d.). As James further explains, literatures or texts, theories, political strategies and activism, can be used to engage in criticism of colonialism and challenge structural inequalities, in order to bring about social justice (n.d.). For instance, African writer and critic, Chinue Achebe reinterpreted the colonial literature - *Conrad's Heart of Darkness (1902)*. Achebe questioned the motives and exposed the flaws and contradictions in this work. In order to move forward, accept and respect our own cultures and that of others, decolonization of our thinking is necessary. Decolonization is another way of thinking about research or education and it involves reclaiming indigenous ways of knowing and being (Louis, 2007). Linda Smith' (1999) decolonizing methodologies are concerned with demanding space for indigenous research through critiquing Western knowledge creation as the mono-cultural enterprise thereby affirming indigenous knowledge systems in research practice. With this mindset, educational policy formulation and implementation must reflect the knowledge of indigenous communities.

Last but not least, it is important to highlight that policy and practice are bound up together and one cannot function without the other. If policies are formulated but not implemented - then what purpose do they serve? Who benefits if policies are only written on paper and not put into practice? As Foley describes it, policy (like theory) is a “systematic thought” and practice is a “systematic action,” they are working together (2000, p. 9).

Currently, the Government of Liberia (GOL) is committed to enacting policies that address the educational situation in the country, but as to how the policies will be enforced and the repercussions of civil disobedience, is not stated. Additionally, the government wants to improve the education system and ensures Liberia becomes a knowledge society like the rest of the world (ESP, 2010; UNICEF Liberia, 2012; & USAID Liberia, 2014). If Liberia is to become a knowledge society, it must commit to investing in the education system particularly the HE system. Basic education, secondary education, higher education and adult education are all of equal value to the nation building and the post-conflict reconstruction agenda. Exploring Virtual and Distance Education (VDE) could be what Liberia's HEIs need to mitigate the issues of teachers and professors' shortages, as well as limited adult education programs/opportunities, lack of research materials, limited HE capacity for high school graduates and other issues facing HE in Liberia. The use of VDE will give Liberia's Ministry of Education an opportunity to create programs that are culturally relevant to life in Liberia, which can complement the current traditional American system of learning.

General Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- 1) What approach to higher education policy would benefit the Liberian higher education system?
- 2) What other models of learning can promote Education for All in urban and rural Liberia?
- 3) How can funding be mobilized to support higher education in urban and rural Liberia?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a thorough examination of scholarly literatures and research articles specific to the education system and policies in Liberia particularly in higher education (HE), as well as the future of virtual and distance education (VDE) in urban and rural regions. In examining Liberia's education policies, it is important to investigate the education system in general, as the history of poor quality education in Liberia's primary and secondary schools affects students' academic performance in higher education institutions (HEIs). To reiterate, Liberia's poor quality education dates far back to the 18th century when the first few public schools and HEIs were established by Americo-Liberian leadership. The six themes investigated in this chapter include:

1. Liberia's education system
2. The impact of the 14-year civil war on Liberia's education system
3. Liberia's educational policies particularly in higher education
4. The future of Virtual and Distance Education in urban and rural Liberia
5. Information and Communication Technologies in Liberia
6. Funding of Higher Education in Liberia

Liberia's Education System

The education system in Liberia during pre-colonial era was an informal one. According to Maugham (1969), Indigenous Africans from tribes of northwestern Liberia had two systems of educational institutions called the Poro (for males) and the Sande (for females). Female students were taught basic life skills such as household management, cooking, childcare, farming, and the use of herbal medicine, while the males were taught basic survival skills such as hunting, fishing,

agriculture and craft. Students were sometimes taught to read and write Arabic and learned their tribe's traditions, cultures and expectations. This means that Indigenous Africans had a system of learning that was practical and beneficial to their community at that time. Indigenous Africans were only described as illiterates because they lacked formal education and could not read and write in English.

Upon the arrival of the Americo-Liberians, an American formal education system emerged. But it was made available only to Americo-Liberian families and Indigenous Liberian families affiliated with the ruling class. This formal education attempted to copy the U.S. educational system but due to lack of funding, shortage of teachers, and government low budget allocations to the education sector, the education system was mediocre compared to that of the U.S. and other African nations (Liberia factsheet, 2012; Roberts et al., 1964). For instance, when Liberia allocated 14% of its national budget to the education sector in 2012, neighboring countries like Sierra Leone allocated 18.1% in 2009 and Cote d'Ivoire allocated 24.6% in 2008 (Liberia factsheet, 2012). As shown in Table 1 below, Liberia's national budget to the education sector is increasing but still remains low compared to other post-conflict nations.

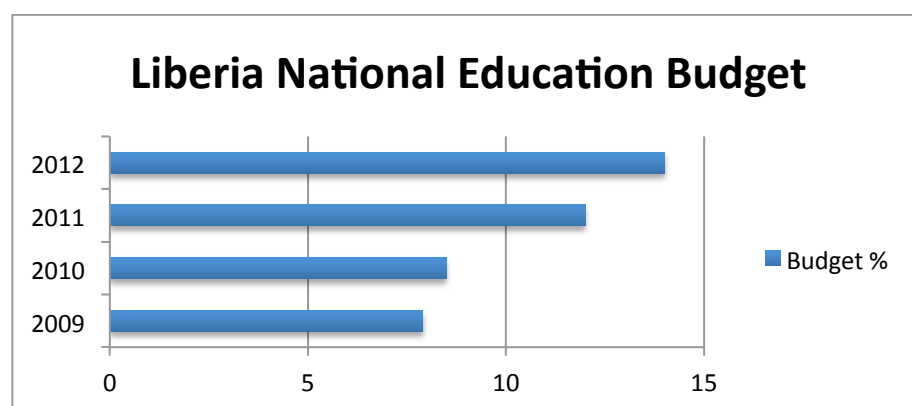


Table 1. Data Source: Liberia Right to Education Factsheet 2012

Apart from that, higher education programs were often not tailored to the needs of the people or the economy. Americo-Liberians found Western education suitable for their needs but did not consider the educational needs of the majority (Indigenous Liberians), and did not consider any informal or traditional learning methods that Indigenous Liberians were accustomed to. As a result of this, Indigenous Liberians who wanted their children to have access to formal and informal method of learning, found it difficult to handle both. This was partly because Indigenous Liberians found conflicts in schedules, ideas and values between the two systems of learning. Despite the introduction of the *2001 Free and Compulsory Education Law*, many Indigenous families still did not encourage their children to pursue a formal education. Nevertheless between 1963 and 1980, Indigenous Liberians in urban regions began to accept the need for formal education, but this was not the case for people in many rural areas (Nelson, 1985). With the shortage of skilled teachers, inadequate infrastructures, insufficient teaching supplies for teachers, and the lack of funding for parents to support their children's educational needs, education remained problematic for the nation.

Professor Nutting, who worked in Liberia as the coordinator of the teacher education project, explained that the Liberian Department of Public Instruction (LDPI) and the U.S. International Co-operation Administration (USICA) jointly developed a rural teacher education institution that was expected to produce 50 – 75 elementary school teachers yearly. This was an attempt to break the educational setbacks that crippled the country for generations especially in the rural areas. LDPI and USICA believed that “the effectiveness of schools results more from the excellence of the teachers than from any other factor” (Nutting, 1959, p. 440). The decision to situate the institution in the interior of Liberia, Fisebu village in the Zorzor district of the western province near the Guinea border, was a brilliant idea. One of the reasons for

concentrating on education in rural Liberia was to accelerate development and support the unification of the 15 counties. It is important to mention that various States in the U.S. established the counties in Liberia. For example, the State of Maryland established Maryland County in Liberia, the State of Mississippi established Sinoe County, and so forth (see the Appendix). In theory, the institution had clear operational goals, a vigorous selection and recruitment process for admission, and an excellent two-year teacher training program for the students admitted. It even had incentives to attract and retain students and instructors in the program. But in practice, the leadership capacity to enforce the institution's set goals was lacking thereby hindering the chance to realize the institution's long-term success. Again, policy and practice are critical to the success of any educational endeavors.

The formal education system in Liberia, similar to that of the U.S., is made up of two years of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, three years of junior high school, three years of senior high school and four years of university education or two years of vocational/technical skills or teacher training programs. Public primary and junior secondary educations are free under the law (beginning at age 6), but students are expected to purchase school supplies. In 2006, the Ministry of Education (MOE) under the leadership of President Sirleaf had to enforce the 2001 Free and Compulsory School Law because some public elementary schools were still illegally charging school fees. As mentioned earlier, the numerous issues facing public schools coupled with the low level of teacher motivation, has caused the quality of education to worsen in Liberia. It is also important to mention that private schools and private higher education institutions (HEIs) before the civil war, delivered quality education to those families who could afford the high fees. These private schools and HEIs operated by philanthropists and religious educators, delivered quality education by offering practical hands-

on programs, and utilizing both formal and informal learning methods that had much relevance to life in Liberia.

In addition to that, accredited private HEIs in Liberia before the civil war were by far better than the public HEIs. This was mostly because the former were known to produce graduates who were equipped to work in the Liberian economy. Some of these private HEIs often provided better quality education, access to technology, well-stocked libraries and on campus transportation for students and university staff. One of the three longest operating HEIs in Liberia was Cuttington College (currently Cuttington University), which is a private sectarian institution operated by the Episcopal Church. As Maugham (1969) stated, students from Cuttington College learned practical agriculture and horticulture by working on the institution's farm and coffee plantation. The other two longest operating HEIs are: the William V. S. Tubman University, and the University of Liberia, both are public institutions. At present, HEIs in post-conflict Liberia (private and public) are facing major educational challenges due to the civil war, high demand for HE and minimal operating budget to accommodate this high demand.

The issues of HE quality, cost and accessibility in Liberia have always been a major concern to Liberians and to the international community. Liberia's national education standards compared to other neighboring countries like Ghana, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, or international standards – are extremely low. Many Liberians prefer to travel abroad or to neighboring countries in search for quality education. Furthermore, the events of the 14-year civil war have worsened the quality of an already fragile HE system.

The Impact of the 14-year Civil War on Liberia's Education System

The 1989 civil war in Liberia was destructive and devastating, and disrupted the existing tenuous education system. The civil war claimed the lives of an estimated 250,000 people and another 500,000 fled the country (UNICEF, 2011). It lasted for 14 years and Liberia lost most of its skilled workers. Teachers, professors, foreign investors and other skilled workers fled the country to seek refuge in other countries. In addition to losing researchers, students and staff, Liberia's HEIs lost major financial security. Fourteen years is such a long time that many skilled workers are not able to uproot and return to Liberia to partake in the post-conflict reconstruction process. The massive destruction of educational infrastructures resulted in the closure of schools and HEIs, which led to the increase in illiteracy rate across the country. When it ended in 2004, the civil war resulted in a 72% illiteracy rate (Ndebe, 2010). Table 2 below shows improvements in the current distribution of literacy rate among Liberian youth and adult. However, there are still lot of work to be done in terms of increasing the literacy rate and rebuilding the education system.

Category	Literacy rate %
Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%) 2008-2012 (Male)	63.5
Youth (15-24 years) literacy rate (%) 2008-2012 (Female)	37.2
Number per 100 population 2012, mobile phones	56.4
Number per 100 population 2012, Internet users	3.8
Total adult literacy rate (%) 2008-2012	42.9

Table 2. Data Source: UNICEF 2013 Statistics

Higher Education in Liberia

Founded over a century ago, Liberia's two major HEIs - the University of Liberia and Cuttington College - enrolled about 90% of all HE students in Liberia before the civil war (Ndebe, 2010). However, previously, the demand for HE was not as high as it is now.

Enrolments at the University of Liberia grew from four hundred students then, to about twenty-five thousand now. This spectacular increase in demand is problematic as the numbers are too high for the two public universities to provide the kind of quality education one would expect. In addition to that, students in these over-populated universities have a low standard of living and poor academic performance. This is due to the fact that too many students have to share the limited lodging and library infrastructures, and in most cases lack financial assistance and student support services.

Many of these issues have not yet been resolved while the current demand for HE has increased astronomically. As Ndebe asserts, "the manpower for all levels of reconstruction in Liberia comes from institutions of higher education which are the wellsprings for future growth and development" (2010, p. 4). This is a reminder to the GOL that post-conflict reconstruction efforts cannot only focus on improving basic education but must also focus on improving HE. The branch of Liberia's Ministry of Education (MOE) responsible for formulating and implementing policies in private and public HEIs is the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE).

According to the NCHE factsheet (2014), there are currently approximately 33 accredited tertiary institutions in Liberia, of which 8 are public institutions. About 14 institutions are operating in rural areas across Liberia. Public institutions in Liberia are fully funded by the

Government but, as stated earlier, Government budget for HE and education in general is low. The NCHE claims, based on certain criteria private institutions could qualify for government subsidies, but there is no evidence that this is happening. As of 2004, two-thirds of the teaching faculty in HEIs in Liberia held only bachelor degrees in their field, and the institutions lack adequate textbooks, libraries with relevant academic materials, and student support services (Flomo, 2013). Another question worth asking is: will investing in Virtual and Distance Education aid Liberia's education system in realizing accessible quality education in public HEIs, and competing in the 21st century knowledge economy?

In an effort to help combat the problems facing Liberia's HEIs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) established the *Excellence in Higher Education for Liberian Development Project*. Through this project, USAID partnered with the University of Liberia and Cuttington University "to build centers of excellence to expand access to, improve the quality of, and enhance the relevance of higher education programs in engineering and agriculture, fields that are critical to address Liberia's development challenges" (USAID, 2013, p. 1).

Liberia's Educational Policies in Higher Education

It is quite easy to sit back and criticize governments in developing nations, but the reality of the day-to-day administrations is reliant on international policies and/or lending constraints from international agencies. There are a number of issues that influence policies in developing nations especially in cases where policy formulation and implementation are dependent on monetary assistance from international organizations. According to Bottery (2006), one of the forces that facilitate economic globalization is:

The locking of nation states into free-market agreements by supra-national organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank, who stipulate that financial assistance is conditional upon the dismantling of trade barriers and of their entry into a global system of free markets. (p. 7)

In the same way, educational policies in nation states are influenced by these supra-national organizations. Below I review several important documents and policies that seek to improve the education system including *the 2001 Free and Compulsory School Law* and *the New Education Reform Act of 2011*. They both focus on basic and secondary education because the funding from the international community is provided for that purpose.

The Liberian Declaration of Independence and the Liberian Constitution. According to Maugham and Nelson (1969; 1985), the Liberian Declaration of Independence and the Liberian Constitution of 1847 were modeled after the U.S. Constitution. Americo-Liberian delegates from three counties issued these two documents on July 8, 1847 and July 26, 1847 respectively. The Declaration of Independence is a well-written document that states, “Liberia is a free and sovereign republic and must be recognized as such by neighboring nations.” The Liberian Constitution of 1847 consists of five main articles that are divided into sections and addresses the executive, legislative, judicial powers, policy and bill of rights of Liberians. Both documents are laws in theory but the practice was somewhat different at the time. For instance, the Constitution makes reference to laws regarding social justice, human rights and religious freedom, but the leadership did not uphold those laws.

After a thorough examination of the two documents, I have realized that education, and specifically HE, was not a priority. This is no surprise since many government officials were in

the habit of sending their children abroad or to neighboring countries for secondary and post-secondary education. Can a U.S. based Constitution model have relevance to the Liberian context? If education is a necessity, then why not to strengthen education in the country described as the ‘land of the freed’? The Constitution of 1847 had to be revised in 1986 to reaffirm the law and address these and other concerns.

The Constitution of 1986 was revised in 2002 and currently replaces the Constitution of 1847, which now has formulated policies that seek to rectify the educational dilemma in the nation. This thirteen-chapter document with ninety-seven articles mentioned education in a few areas. Article 6 of chapter II states:

The Republic shall, because of the vital role assigned to the individual citizen under this Constitution for the social, economic and political wellbeing of Liberia, provide equal access to educational opportunities and facilities for all citizens to the extent of available resources. Emphasis shall be placed on the mass education of the Liberian people and the elimination of illiteracy (Liberia’s Constitution and Election Forum, 2014, p. 3).

Article 10 of chapter II states, that “The Republic shall ensure the publication and dissemination of this Constitution throughout the Republic and the teaching of its principles and provisions in all institutions of Learning in Liberia” (p. 4).

Article 15 (b) of chapter III affirms:

The right encompasses the right to hold opinions without interference and the right to knowledge. It includes freedom of speech and of the press, academic freedom to receive and impart knowledge and information and the right of libraries to make such knowledge available. It includes non-interference with the use of the mail, telephone and telegraph. It

likewise includes the right to remain silent. (p. 5)

As observed, this Constitution acknowledges the need for equal access to educational opportunities and facilities of all Liberians from urban and rural regions. It emphasizes mass education to help eliminate illiteracy in the country and the need to teach the principles of the Constitution in all learning institutions in Liberia. It also acknowledges academic freedom to receive and impart knowledge.

The current Government of Liberia (GOL) is committed to the Education for All (EFA) campaign and to promoting education in urban and rural Liberia – as expressed in the Constitution. The GOL is also committed to reviewing the Constitution of 1986 to update words or language usage that does not reflect modern terminologies. Their effort towards basic education is commendable but with regards to higher education, policy and practice is still lacking. Having said that, the *Right to Education Country Factsheet of Liberia* alerts us to the fact that:

Liberia has ratified the key regional and international conventions protecting the right to education. However, Liberia has not signed any of the instruments allowing individual complaints for human rights abuses at the international level, and its domestic law, in particular the constitution, does not directly incorporate international human rights laws, which means that there are little means to complaint about the right to education in Liberia. (2012, p. 1)

Liberia's 2001 Free and Compulsory School Law. The Act was passed into law in January of 2002 to repeal the 1972 law and all its amendments. This Act establishes free

compulsory primary education and free compulsory basic education for all school-age children in Liberia (ESP, 2007). The document consists of five chapters and addresses: the General Policy Framework; the education system of Liberia; the Ministry of Education; the conduct of schools and staff; and the advisory and regulatory bodies for the education and training sector.

Although Liberia's 2001 Free and Compulsory School Law did not directly benefit the HE sector, indirectly it did because it supported primary and junior secondary education of school-age children in Liberia, and prepared students for tertiary level education. As a matter of fact, one of the major problems facing HEIs in Liberia is that students lack the basic knowledge required for tertiary level workload. This is one of the reasons why the GOL number one priority is focused on providing quality education at the basic and secondary levels. Further to that, according to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) 2012 report, Liberia is deemed one the world's poorest countries and might not meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with regards to its basic education and gender equity agenda. This is another reason why the GOL is focused on providing quality education at the basic and secondary levels. That said, I still believe that primary, secondary, tertiary and adult education must be of equal priority to the GOL. Obviously, the expenditures at each of these levels of education will vary, but the level of engagement and support from the GOL and the international donors must be of equal priority.

In 2006, the Netherlands government provided monetary assistance under the UNICEF education project *Education in Emergencies and Post-Crisis Transition* (EEPCT), to support Liberia's efforts in rebuilding its education system (UNICEF Liberia Report, 2012). According to the report, "the purpose of the funded education program in Liberia and its set goals, are to

promote and support sustainable progress in efforts to achieve the MDGs and EFA goals” (p. 5). Why would Education for All only focus on basic and secondary education? The report states that the funding was used strategically to strengthen service delivery; capacity development; community empowerment; advocacy and policy-making. The funding was also used in the construction of primary schools; the distribution of classroom furniture across the country; pupil teachers training; data collection and such – with a focus on primary and secondary education only.

This Act failed to address issues pertaining to higher education and Adult education hence it had to be revised to reflect present-day realities. Stemming out of this revision and with the financial support from the EEPCT project, the new Education Reform Act of 2011 was passed. Although the main focus is to strengthen decentralization of the education system and enforce free and compulsory basic education for grades one through nine (UNICEF Liberia Report, 2012), it also addressed gender equity in schools, teacher training programs and higher education. The lesson learned here is that in order to combat the educational crisis facing the nation, education at all levels must be prioritized.

The New Education Reform Act of 2011. As mentioned above, the Education Act of 2011 was enacted to enforce the free and compulsory basic education law, and also to address other educational goals derived from the MDGs and EFA goals. In addition to enforcing free and compulsory education for all children in Liberia, “this act also aims to assist the government in decentralizing the education sector, which is intended to improve the provision of education” (ESP, 2010, p. 6). This forty-six pages document consists of ten chapters that stipulate issues ranging from the reconstruction, decentralization and structuring of the education system, to the

function, power and financing of the education ministry. Chapter one of the document, sub-section 1.4.1 states that the act is applicable to all learning institutions in Liberia, namely, private and public schools, faith-based and boarding schools, teacher training colleges and vocational institutions, colleges and universities, partners in the field of education, and Maritime and forestry institutions (Liberia Education Reform Act document, 2011). The only two learning institutions that the Act does not apply to are the Military Training Centre and the Police/Security Training Institutions.

Since the formulation of the new Education Reform Act 2011, issues in the Liberian education system that were ignored for years are starting to get noticed and discussed. Some of these issues include: gender equity in all learning institutions, special education for students with disabilities, and education grants and scholarships. In addressing gender equity in all learning institutions in Liberia, the national policy on girls' education is dedicated to improving girls and women access to vocational training, science and technology and continuing education.

The Beijing 2010 review on Liberia states that the policy on girls' education "stresses the development and implementation of education, training and retraining policies for women, especially young women re-entering the labor market, to provide skills to meet the needs of a changing socio-economic context for improving their employment opportunities" (p. 13). The Special Education Policy addresses the disparities between people with disabilities and people without disabilities in the educational system especially girls. In addition to the already existing scholarships, the GOL established the Liberia Education Trust Fund (LETF) which supports students especially girls studying in various secondary and post-secondary institutions across the country.

The Accelerated Learning Program (ALP) was implemented in 1999 to protect children's right to education while ensuring access to quality education. This program was specifically initiated to reach over-aged and out-of-school children and youth (Beijing Report, 2010). ALP is an idea the Ministry of Education in Liberia adopted from the Ugandan Ministry of Education – a program Uganda implemented after the civil war. The Beijing report asserts that, in terms of adult education, the initiation of a national rural women's program under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Gender and Development, "increased the capacity of rural women through the provision of farming implements, seeds, clerical supplies, training workshops," and also constructed storage facilities in twelve counties for the women's agricultural produce (2010, p.25).

Act Establishing the National Commission of Higher Education Policy of 1989.

According to Liberia's 2010 Education Sector Plan (ESP) document, the specific policy objectives for HE in Liberia are:

To improve on the regulatory and governance mechanisms for higher education; to improve on the funding mechanisms for higher education; to improve on the quality of the teaching staff; to put in place mechanisms that result in programs on offer and research conducted in institutions of learning being relevant to the needs of the society; and to reduce inequities in access to higher education. (p. xvi)

The document also discussed short and long-term strategy related action for the above HE policy objectives. Some of these strategies are:

Strengthening the capacity of the NCHE to enable it better perform its role and responsibilities; developing partnerships in the funding of higher education; conducting

assessment on the competence, qualifications and relevant experience of teaching staff in HE institutions to improve staff quality; establishing ties between foreign universities of quality and national institutions to facilitate program improvement, staff training and staff exchange arrangements; and conducting critical analysis of HE policies to revising and updating them. (p. xvi)

Higher education in Liberia remains a major concern today because efforts to formulate and enforce policies are slow due to poverty, corruption, poor leadership and mismanagement of resources, disconnect in policy and practice, among other issues. This makes me wonder if attempts to resolve these issues might be the solution to improving the higher education system, and not necessarily investing in VDE. In light of this, the rest of this study will explore the following two concepts; (i) finding means to resolve social issues such as poor leadership, corruption, policy disconnect, and such, and/or (ii) investing in virtual and distance education.

A document issued by the Liberian Embassy in Washington DC reports that the two requirements for establishing HE institutions in Liberia are: (i) to first conform to policies set by the NCHE and (ii) to obtain a charter to operate from the National Legislature of Liberia (2004). As of 2004, the NCHE was in the process of reviewing applications pertaining to the operation of online and distance HEIs in Liberia, but unfortunately I could not find any reliable information stating its decision. This same document states that:

Institutions that are distance education-related and that have approached the National Commission on Higher Education for operation in Liberia are being processed. Since this is a new area of exploration for the Commission, the public is advised that any decision already reached reference these institutions are tentative and that the Commission is

continuing its deliberations on these institutions to final conclusions vis-à vis their place in the Liberian Higher Education System. (2004, p. 1)

The recent Ebola outbreak is another major concern the GOL is dealing with. At present, the GOL priority is focused on controlling the disease and preventing future outbreaks. Due to this situation, schools and HEIs had to be closed and students home-schooled. This has caused the difficulty in obtaining up-to-date and reliable information on HE policies, status or research projects. Even the University of Liberia (UL) website provides no evidence of distance education programs being offered. Cuttington University website information cannot be accessed beyond the front page, and the William V. S. Tubman University has no website. UL and Cuttington university websites does not show when the websites were created and updated. From conversation with relatives in Liberia, I have learned schools and HEIs have been closed since March of 2014. Parents are home-schooling their children and also utilizing educational programs on the radio.

In a statement by the Liberian Ministry of Education, the government's strategy to ensure education rights to all Liberians focuses on the following: enforcing free and compulsory basic education; providing quality education by monitoring learning achievements at the secondary level; and formulating and implementing laws to combat gender discrimination (ESP, 2010). However, with regards to education accessibility, the government is not too keen on investing in distance education but rather investing in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of educational infrastructures and rural teacher training institutes (TTI). For example, TTI were rehabilitated, staffed and equipped to provide basic teacher training for elementary schools in Liberia (ESP, 2010). As an incentive, the GOL provided free tertiary education and stipends to all students specializing in education - to increase the number of trained teachers in the country. While these

actions are steps in the right direction, there is still more to be done. The slow rate at which educational facilities are being constructed cannot keep up with the educational demand of the nation. Virtual and Distance Education can somewhat bridge the gap between educational demands and lack of infrastructures. Teachers' training institute can most certainly benefit from VDE, but the question is, does Liberia have policies to support best practices in the online world? The section below probes this question.

The Future of Virtual and Distance Education in Liberia

The concepts "information age" or "knowledge-based society" have instigated the conversation about virtual and distance education (VDE) in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hicks, 2007; Moyo, 2003; Simmons et al., 2011; SES, 2014). The conversation around VDE in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is important because statistics shows less than 25% of qualified high school graduates will make it to the university level (Simmons et al., 2011). This is due to limited capacity in HEIs and/or no access to higher education in rural areas.

Recent report from the Front Page news states that out of the thirteen thousand students who wrote the 2014 university entrance examinations in Liberia, only fifteen passed. In 2013, the same report stated that all twenty-five thousand students failed the university entrance examinations. This is a national crisis and an urgent one for that matter. It certainly raised the following questions: was the high number of student failures due to poor quality basic education? Or was it the institutions' strategy to administer a higher standard university entrance examination in order to reduce the number of students admitted? Either way, the GOL must investigate other models of advanced education (for example, VDE), or at least figure out ways to improve higher education in the country. In spite of the issues and concerns affiliated with

distance education, there are numerous benefits if it is introduced in a culturally sensitive and innovative manner. For example, the program design must be relevant to the nation, there must be a reliable ICT system, and most of all there must be strong and effective leadership.

Virtual and Distance Education in Liberia may seem too far-fetched at the moment but it is certainly the time to start the conversation. The GOL must consider distance education as one of the solutions to creating accessible higher education throughout the nation. Other African nations such as Rwanda and Uganda recovering from civil war find VDE accessible, convenient and sustainable. VDE serves to mitigate issues such as: the shortages of trained instructors; lack of up-to-date research materials; and the brain drain phenomenon - which is losing talented students to other nations. In 2001, UNESCO produced a set of guidelines on the use of distance education for teacher education – highlighting the importance of life-long learning and the need to upgrade existing teachers' knowledge (Moyo, 2003).

There are several virtual and distance learning organizations operating in various parts of Africa. Nations such as Kenya, South Africa, Mozambique, Nigeria and many other countries have all benefitted from distance education programs in HEIs. As mentioned before, scholarly literature on virtual and distance education (VDE) in SSA is enormous but VDE specific to Liberia is very limited. There is an urgent need for HEIs, the government and development agencies to support and ensure the success of VDE in various tertiary institutions across Liberia. This study investigates three distance-learning organizations operating in SSA. These three organizations are: African Virtual University (AVU), University of South Africa (UNISA) and University of Victoria Early Childhood Development Virtual University (UVic ECDVU).

African Virtual University. The African Virtual University (AVU) was founded in 1997 as a project of the World Bank, and is headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. AVU is an intergovernmental organization partnered with over fifty institutions operating in over twenty-seven nations across Africa, some of which are: Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Benin (AVU website, 2012). Findings from a research conducted by Nafukho and Muyia (2013) discovered that, AVU's design and implementation in Africa was initially "flawed" because its distance learning opportunity did not lower the costs of higher education, as well as the initial challenges the project faced. But over a period of 16 years, the participating regions are now considered one of the most dynamic e-learning markets on the planet and have witnessed increased digitization of universities, booming enrollment in online higher education and the rapid adoption of self-paced learning.

The main purpose of AVU is to provide world-class education and professional development to nations in SSA. AVU has numerous learning centers where programs are delivered; educators communicate among themselves via online tools, and students share experiences with other partner HEIs across the world. As Moyo explains, "the AVU model offers rich online resources that educators can use in a cost-effective way (2003, p. 501). AVU provides students with several online manuals from its website as well as a digital library that has a wide collection of full-text journals and a broad range of other academic materials. According to Moyo (2003):

The AVU uses a technical infrastructure that integrates satellite and Web-based technologies to transmit video and data resources from anywhere in the world to multiple sites in Africa. It also provides the flexibility to incorporate proven and emerging interactive tools and multimedia resources to support student learning and network

operations. A combination of live and videotaped instruction supported by textbooks, a digital library, and course notes are provided by leading universities and other content providers. Students interact with their instructors and other students via phone, e-mail, discussion forums, or fax. The AVU transmits courses and seminars using a satellite whose footprint covers the entire African continent, Western Europe, and the east coast of the United States and Canada. (p. 501)

Delivery of VDE programs depends on a reliable ICT system. ICT offers developing nations a chance to fully participate in the global knowledge economy as it presents numerous prospects for development. The full potential of VDE in SSA has not been realized because the ICT systems have not been fully exploited (Moyo, 2003). This poses challenges that limit the success of VDE in developing nations. Other challenges that limit the success of VDE in developing nations are: the lack of educational and economic policy guidelines for decision-making purposes, lack of effective leadership, limited financial and infrastructural support for ICT, and distance education programs not relevant to the specific country. In order to ripe the full benefits of VDE and ICT in developing nations, the above challenges must be resolved. In the context of Liberia, strong leadership and enforceable policies specific to distance education can ensure a successful and beneficial VDE program in HEIs.

In spite of the challenges facing VDE in SSA, scholars continue to be optimistic and hopeful that the objectives of any nation embarking on the use of VDE in higher education can be achieved. For example, the Kenyan site of AVU faced problems such as: shortages of Information Technology (IT) staff, poor telecommunications infrastructure, poor management structures and policies, and lack of teamwork. While the University of Zimbabwe AVU site faced regulatory and technological issues among other problems. Moyo states that, once the

issues were gradually resolved, “clients increasingly began to use and benefit from the AVU resources such as the digital library, electronic mail, the Internet, workshops, seminars, and language courses” (2003, p. 505). The issue of high cost associated with connectivity and Internet access (as mentioned in several of the literature and has proven to be important for setting up and maintaining VDE programs), is an insubstantial one. It is insubstantial because, according to a World Bank report, “about a quarter of countries in the region grew at 7 percent or better, and several African countries are among the fastest growing in the world” (Africa’s Pulse, 2013). There are many rich and resourceful nations in the continent of Africa – which means, if finances and resources are spent wisely and responsibly, the issue of cost should not be a problem. In addition to that, collaboration with other nations can lead to resource sharing, improve quality of distance education, team efforts and increase program success, while at the same time reducing cost (Moyo, 2003). It is important to mention that collaboration among nations must be mindful and respectful of cultural differences, time zone, and set accreditation requirements fair for all partners (Moyo, 2003). Collaboration must also be inclusive in its decision-making processes thereby soliciting inputs from all its key partners, of which are governments, higher education institutions and develop agencies (Moyo, 2003).

University of South Africa. The University of South Africa (UNISA) distance education program is another organization extending its services to other parts of the African continent. UNISA, also known as Africa’s leading Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution, offers internationally accredited qualifications and have world-class resources that inspire learners to create meaningful futures on their own terms (UNISA Website, 2015). UNISA offers study opportunities to more than 400,000 students from across South Africa, Africa and other parts of the world. It offers a diverse choice of study fields at levels from certificate to degree. The

university is considered South Africa's most productive accounting for 12.8% of all degrees conferred by the country's 23 public universities and universities of technology (UNISA, 2015).

UNISA was founded in 1873 as the University of Good Hope and operated initially as an examining body but in 1916 changed its name to University of South Africa (UNISA). In 1946 it became the first public university in the world to teach exclusively by means of distance education. In 2004 UNISA merged with another large distance learning institution, Technikon Southern Africa, and incorporated VUDEC (the former Vista University's Distance Education Campus). It became the largest university in both South Africa and Africa ((UNISA, 2015). UNISA's vision, "towards the African university in the service of humanity" drives the need to find answers to Africa's educational and developmental problems. By forming partnerships in Africa and throughout the world, UNISA is able to help the people of Africa achieve their dreams (UNISA, 2015).

According to UNISA Legislation, apart from the Higher Education Act 101 of 1997 and the University Statute, the operation of UNISA is affected by a number of other laws. Most of these laws regulate the manner in which South Africa is giving effect to its transformation into a constitutional democracy and active member of the world community of nations. There are also laws that deal with the demands of technology and globalization (UNISA, 2015).

University of Victoria Early Childhood Development Virtual University. University of Victoria Early Childhood Development Virtual University (UVic ECDVU) is an innovative and multifaceted approach to addressing Early Childhood Development (ECD) capacity building and leadership development in Africa. ECDVU is supported by a range of international, regional and local organizations including the employers of participants. It is a unique training and

results-oriented program that uses face-to-face and distributed learning methods including: residential seminars, web-based instruction, CD-ROM and print material support, and a “community of learners” strategy within and among cohort countries (ECDVU, 2015).

The ECDVU grew out of a series of ECD training seminars (Summer Institutes) initiated by UNICEF in 1994/95. In 2000 the World Bank, utilizing Norwegian Educational Trust Funds, supported the development phase of the ECDVU. The World Bank joined by UNICEF, UNESCO, CIDA, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and local employers of participants, supported the delivery of the inaugural three-year graduate degree program phase 1 in Sub-Saharan Africa (ECDVU, 2015). Participating African nations such as Ghana, Nigeria, Malawi, and Kenya find this program to be building leadership capacity, promoting ECD advocacy in Africa, Fostering community participation, providing an opportunity for learning and sharing, and a cost-effective use of technology (ECDVU, 2015).

The ECDVU program in Sub-Saharan Africa has completed a three-year Master degree delivery (SSA-1 2001-2004), a one-year Professional Specialization Certificate program (SSA-2 2006/07) in co-operation with African-based universities, and a one-year Graduate Diploma program (SSA-3 2009/10 and SSA-4 2010/11). The ECDVU courses are fully accredited and are part of the University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care department (ECDVU, 2015). The ECDVU program works with nominees of participating countries to enhance the nation's social and economic development while addressing the needs of their youngest citizens and the families and communities that nurture them (ECDVU, 2015).

The ideas from the above mentioned virtual and distance education designs could potentially work in Liberia. The implementation of a VDE design will afford Liberia the chance

to create a program that teaches Liberians the practice of social justice leadership, democratic leadership and the values of Liberia's current constitution. This is an opportunity for Liberia's MOE to design a program content of useful or relevant African and Western knowledge, that can empower Liberians to unite as one people and work together as a team to develop the nation. As noted in the ESP document, the mission of education in Liberia is "to provide all Liberians with the opportunity to access and complete affordable education of a quality, relevance and appropriateness that meets their needs and that of the nation" (2007, p. i). The ESP document also states that the education vision of Liberia is to be able to provide "a system of education that is flexible, evolves with time and fully meets the needs and aspirations of the people individually and collectively as a nation" (p. i). The MOE can design a VDE program that is flexible, affordable, accessible, and relevant to Liberians. The next section investigates the status of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in Liberia, to see how reliable it is to support VDE in Liberia's urban and rural tertiary institutions.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN LIBERIA

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is key to transforming the delivery of education (Williams et al., 2011; van Brakel & Chisenga, 2003; Mangesi, 2007; World Bank, 2001; & LTA, n.d.), and is also key in the delivery of VDE programs. In other words, ICTs are critical tools for achieving national transformation and socio-economic development programs (LTA, n.d.). In terms of ICTs infrastructures, Liberia used to be the location for a large and important U.S. Telecommunications installation, as well as a relay station that transmitted all of the "voice of America" programming to SSA (Nelson, 1985). Since the civil war, copper wires have been looted and ICTs infrastructures destroyed from one end of the nation to the other.

There is extremely limited telecommunication service in the various counties, and the rural areas have no fixed line service, and no Internet access (LTA, n.d.). Liberia has to start all over in terms of laying the foundation for ICTs, which is crucial for VDE.

The Government of Liberia (GOL) recognizes the importance of ICTs in the education, health, security and governance sectors, and is currently exploring recommendations from the World Bank pertaining to ICTs in SSA. For example, the government is considering building a terrestrial fiber optic network that will serve as its national backbone, and will opt for a long-term solution by accessing marine fiber optic links as a point for global connectivity (LTA, n.d). The government has since developed national ICT policies and has expressed how critical it is to bridge the urban/rural telecommunications gap through planning in its poverty reduction strategy (PRS). Although Liberia has national ICTs policies - of which the objective is to accelerate the integration of education through electronic learning and electronic applications - it still does not have ICTs in education policies. This is certainly a problem as ICTs in education policies are crucial to developing VDE programs.

In addition to not having ICTs in education policies, Liberia also lacks functional electrical grid, roads and basic ICT infrastructures. The lack of electricity and ICT infrastructures in Liberia especially in the rural areas is holding back services to the rural area, as well as the GOL delays in granting permission to institutions wanting to operate distance education at the tertiary level. That said the GOL in partnership with the Netherlands administered an Internet connectivity pilot project in eight schools from six countries. The pilot project called “connecting classrooms programs” was to promote computer skills, Internet navigation and information exchange between students in participating countries (UNICEF, 2011). Also participating in this pilot project were schools from Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and the U.S. – and participating

students had the opportunity to discuss with their peers issues pertaining to education, health, and other common issues (for example, issues affecting youth at the community and national levels). This project was successful because the GOL, UNICEF Liberia and its Netherlands partners were involved, and they monitored closely the success of the project. But in the case of private HEIs providing VDE programs, ICTs in education policies and infrastructures among other requirements, is necessary and crucial for moving forward. ICTs in education policies will help in clarifying expectations and responsibilities, best practices, fair and level playing field and identifying ways to deal with cyber-crimes. Responding to the lack of electricity in Liberia, the GOL is working on developing a public-private partnership with St. Paul River Authority to function as a national economic engine to produce power (IMF, 2007).

Essential to the success of VDE in Liberia, certain measures would have to be put in place before the GOL can grant any distance education institution the permission to operate. These measures include:

A well articulated ICTs in education policies with strategic implementation plan that emphasizes technological training in areas of ICT electronic, construction, rural technology and industry.

Strong and inclusive leadership, zero tolerance for corruption and the formulation of an ICTs advisory team – representatives from the GOL, NGOs, donors, partners and the public.

Sustainable funding or budget allocated to the office responsible for providing and maintaining ICTs infrastructures, as well as an auditing team to ensure operational transparency and accountability.

Reliable electrical grid, Internet connectivity, roads, affordable service cost and adequate modern ICTs facilities.

Develop a pro-active public awareness program specific to the applicability of ICT, the value of ICT in education, and the consequences of cyber-crime (Mangesi, 2007; LTA, n.d.; van Brakel & Chisenga, 2003).

Funding of Higher Education in Liberia

Financing higher education institutions (HEIs) is a worldwide problem; however nowhere in the world finds financing HE more problematic than nations in SSA (Teferra, 2013; Teferra & Altbach, 2004; World Bank, 2010), and Liberia is no exception. Liberia, like many other SSA nations, generates funding for HEIs from state resources. Although there is funding from tuition fees, services, consultancy, renting facilities and others, the bulk of funding for HE comes from the government's education budget. There is also external support that goes towards research in HEIs. In the case of Liberia, the education budget has always been very low compared to other African nations. And this low education budget mostly went to improving and maintaining quality primary and secondary education, infrastructures and such. Thereby leaving little or no funds for improving and maintaining quality HE and its infrastructures. The current situation in Liberia is that, HE is competing with government's priorities such as universal basic education, poverty alleviation, food subsidies, energy – to name a few. Obviously, with such competitiveness for government funding, HEIs can no longer depend on government funding as its major funding sources – as this is not sustainable. It is high time HEIs in Liberia began to explore sustainable funding opportunities, and realized the importance of postsecondary academic institutions as central to the future of Liberia. This section provides suggestions on

other sustainable sources of funding for HEIs in Liberia.

As Hicks (2007) explains “the funding of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa steadily declined as investment emphasis shifted from higher education to basic education” (p.156). This shift was mainly due to SSA nations striving to meet the MDGs and EFA goals, as well as directives from the international community to focus on universal basic education. This has led to the high number of graduates from secondary schools demanding tertiary education, but the current tertiary infrastructures in the Liberian nation cannot accommodate this high demand. This problem could have been resolved if HEIs had sustainable funding to keep up with the in-take of qualified secondary school graduates into HEIs. HEIs providing VDE programs could have also helped decrease the number of students or adult learners waiting for tertiary level education or advanced education. Having said that, HEIs would need a sustainable budget to develop VDE programs, national ICTs in education policies and adequate ICTs infrastructures to accommodate students’ educational need.

The Government of Liberia (GOL) allocated 18 percent of its education budget to tertiary education in 2007/2008, as shown in Table 3 below. But considering the numerous repairs and reconstruction projects needed to reopen HEIs in post-conflict Liberia, that percentage is like a drop of water in the bucket. In other words, unless HEIs can come up with a strategic plan to raise sustainable funds, it could take a very long time before quality improvements are visible. Also with the introduction of a national student loan program in Liberia, it is eminent that HEIs provide quality higher education, adequate learning facilities and laboratories, well-stacked libraries, modern technologies and ample opportunities for student engagements and learning. In addition to that, HEIs must adopt monitoring indicators to monitor for quality improvement and accountability, and results from these indicators could be used to amend or enhance policies and

practices.

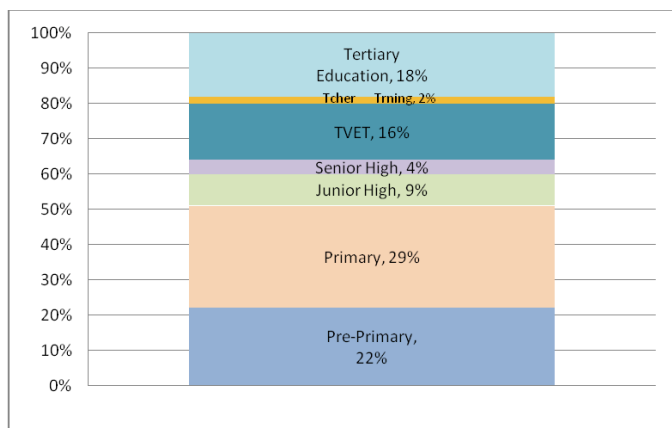


Table 3: Data Source: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance and Budget Bureau Data 2007/08

According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) 2007 report, Liberia's growth has major potential because of its rich natural resources, which include fertile lands for agriculture and tree crop, extensive forestry sources for timber and rubber production, iron ore, gold, diamonds, the ocean and coastal areas. Even cash crops like palm oil, cocoa and others have major potential. All of these industries are expected to expand rapidly. For example, the ArcelorMittal Iron ore mine concession is expected to bring Liberia US \$1.5 billion in investments (IMF, 2007). With strong leadership, accountability, strategic planning and technical capacities, education in Liberia particularly in higher education can improve significantly.

In addition to these funding sources, the following points below provide suggestions on other ways sustainable funding for Liberia's HEIs can be secure:

1. HEIs leadership must advocate and negotiate with the GOL to enact or amend policies that would allow funding raise from the use of renewable natural resources be used to fund education and research (Temu, 2006).
2. Cost sharing should not only be between government funding and student tuitions, but

should include faculty, staff and the public who access services at the university.

3. HEIs must invest in student/staff housing, health centers and security to help bring in extra funds. In other words, HEIs must be creative at outsourcing and entrepreneurship.
4. HEIs leadership must develop professional relationships with their diaspora and alumni networks through engaging fundraising projects.
5. HEIs leadership must invest in research and data analysis projects that can help the government shape effective higher education policies and practices.

In a nutshell, HEIs in Liberia need a fiscal reform, need to be less reliant on government funding, and need to embrace cost sharing and out sourcing business strategies. Higher education leadership must begin to engage the international community to support advanced education as well as basic education, as both are essential to the progress of education in Liberia.

Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

In an attempt to understand Liberia's higher education system and explore virtual and distance education (VDE) as a means to better access education for people in urban and rural Liberia, I chose the exploratory method as my main research tool. Adopting the social constructivist qualitative research approach, I resorted primarily to a critical analysis of primary and secondary data and other available information, as well as drawing on my personal educational experience growing up in Liberia. I examined Liberia's higher education system by analyzing policy documents, non-governmental organizations' reports, statistics, and other scholarly literatures. In addition to this, I reviewed scholarly literatures pertaining to the use of virtual and distance model of learning in Sub-Saharan Africa's HEIs, which (in a lot of ways) is applicable to the Liberian context.

According to Oritsejafor (2009), an exploratory research method "provides many insights into complex social issues and furnishes answers as to how these complexities could be resolved" (p. 99). Oritsejafor asserts that it is useful in social science research because it produces new intuitions to issues that are of scholarly concern. Further to that, exploratory research method utilizes valuable interviews, but in the case of this study, interviews were not feasible due to the recent Ebola crisis in Liberia, as well as the scope of the study. Although this study lacks valuable interviews, the sources discussed are credible and reputable thereby ensuring the validity and reliability of the study.

The exploratory research method employed in this study is a critical analysis of relevant literature pertaining to education in Liberia, higher education policies and distance education in SSA. The literatures search included: computerized search of accessible material from the University of Victoria research database and Google scholar search engine; Websites

information search from UNESCO, UNICEF, IMF, Liberia's MOE, and universities websites in Liberia; manual search of books and peer-reviewed journals articles; and conversations with credible sources in Liberia to assess the current status of the education system as well as to locate published and unpublished studies.

The exploratory method is also a reliable research tool that generated answers to the research questions in this study. In answering the research question: *what approach to higher education policy would benefit the Liberian higher education system?* – Liberia's policy documents were analyzed. These include Liberia's Constitution of 1847 & 1986; Liberia's Education Sector Plan 2010, Liberia's Education Reform Act 2011 and the Act Establishing the National Commission of Higher Education (NCHE) policy in 1989. Peer-reviewed journal articles and books from scholars such as Moyo, Temu, Hicks, Simmons et al., and many others were investigated to answer the research question: *What other model of learning can promote education for all in urban and rural Liberia?* And lastly, peer-reviewed journal articles from scholars such as Teferra, Altbach, and information from the World Bank, IMF and Liberia's Ministry of Finance were investigated to answer the research question: *How can funding be mobilized to support higher education in urban and rural Liberia?* This exploratory research method is a vital and effective way of exploring how feasible VDE would be for Liberia's HEIs.

The purpose of this study was to understand, examine and analyze Liberia's education system, its education policies particularly in higher education, the impact of the civil war on the education system, and explore Virtual and Distance Education in urban and rural higher education institutions to ensure education is accessible to all Liberians. The rationale for exploring VDE is to encourage a healthy competition between distance education providers and traditional model of learning as well as to make advanced education accessible to postsecondary

graduates and adult learners. Hopefully, this healthy competition can encourage both the GOL and other private HEIs to provide quality accessible education to both urban and rural learners.

Researcher's position

As an educated intelligent young Liberian woman, affiliated with Americo-Liberian parents and Indigenous Liberian relatives, I have come to understand the struggles of both Americo-Liberians and Indigenous Liberians. Americo-Liberians perceive Indigenous Liberians as the people who sold them into slavery. Likewise, the Indigenous Liberians perceive the Americo-Liberians as the people who took their lands and subjected them to hardship. There are stories of how people were captured as prisoners of tribal wars between the coastal and interior Africans and then sold into slavery; or stories of how slave masters (the Westerners) pretended to enjoy African cultural dances, and would invite African performers onto their ship only to get the African performers drunk and chained them up as slaves. The intention is not to apportion blame, but rather to remind Liberians of how the struggle began, and how important it is to move forward and not revisit these scenarios. This is the time to focus on creating an equitable and inclusive society for generations to come.

Growing up in Liberia in a middle class, intellectual and influential family, I was fortunate to attend two great private schools that provided me with a strong foundation and a jumpstart from elementary school to junior high school. I was oblivious to the fact that my quality educational experience was accessible to only a few school-age children. I would later understand how privileged I was in a private school, and how the quality of education in public schools (elementary, secondary and tertiary levels) was very poor. Worst of all, formal education was not available to most rural communities. This was due to a number of reasons that include but are not limited to the lack of textbooks, lack of equal access to education, high cost of tertiary

education and low paid unmotivated teachers. The concept “Education for All” is clearly supported in Liberia’s education policies, but has never been a reality for many families especially those in the rural areas.

Ethical and Political Considerations

I admit that having studied in North America for over ten years and developed Western assumptions, I could misinterpret the policy, the education system and the educational needs of the Liberian people. Using Western ideology to analyze policies in the context of Africa, and specifically Liberia, can be misleading and not beneficial to the Liberian people. With that in mind, it is my intention to analyze Liberia’s education system and higher education policies based on my personal experience in Liberia, conversations with relatives currently residing in Liberia, as well as scholarly literatures on the subject matter and specific to the context of SSA and/or Liberia. This will ensure that my findings and recommendations are valid, reliable and representative of the Liberian people in terms of their educational goals.

Limitations

One limitation to an exploratory research method is the inability to observe problems as an outside or inside observer – hence the need to settle for available primary and/or secondary data (Oritsejafor, 2009). In the case of this study, I was limited to exploring mostly secondary data (scholarly literatures and websites) and a few primary data (Government documents). Another limiting factor is the timeframe allotted to conducting this study. As stated earlier, it was my intention to visit Liberia before embarking on the research phase of this study, but due to travel restrictions among other reasons, I could not make the trip. And finally, there are generally inherent concerns related to the objectivity of findings when conducting qualitative research - which can prove challenging when trying to establish validity, reliability, and truthfulness.

Delimitations

With regards to delimitations, I chose to conduct a study specific to Liberia (one nation) because of the acute social problems facing the people of that nation. Also because there are limited numbers of research specific to distance education in Liberia. In spite of the limited research materials on Liberia and distance education, other scholarly research on the subject of virtual and distance education were useful in the context of Liberia. There was an opportunity to compare similar events in other SSA nations but the focus was mainly on Liberia. Personally, it afforded this study the opportunity to be representative of the Liberian people.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Creswell (2014) suggests the use of multiple validity strategies to enhance the strength of the qualitative research and the researcher's ability to assess the accuracy of the findings as well as to convince readers of that accuracy. With that, I incorporated five validity and reliability strategies to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of this study. First of all, I clarify my bias by the constant self-reflections which occurred during this process, and of which I openly and honestly stated in my researcher's position section. Secondly, the selection of scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, and books afforded me the opportunity to triangulate several data sources by examining statistics from these sources and using it to build a coherent justification for my research themes. Thirdly, the use of rich, thick description in the historical background section, contextualized the findings, provided counter-argument to the themes and made the findings more realistic and richer. Fourthly, the use of peer debriefing enhance the accuracy of the findings, and allowed me to consider the peer debriefer's review, comments and questions about the study. Finally, the use of an external auditor – independent of this study and

distinct from the peer debriefer – provided this study an objective assessment. These contributions have all been incorporated into the research, and have influenced the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter provides the findings of the research study which have been reported under the following three themes: (i) lack of social justice leadership; (ii) disconnect between policy and practice; and (iii) lack of national ICT in education policy. The purpose of the study was to understand Liberia's education system (pre and post-conflict), analyze Liberia's higher education policies and explore the use of Virtual and Distance Education in Liberia's higher education institutions (HEIs). The following research questions were used to guide the study: "What approach to higher education policy would benefit the Liberian higher education system?" "What other models of learning can promote education for all in urban and rural Liberia?" and "How can funding be mobilized to support higher education in urban and rural Liberia?"

In examining Liberia's higher education system, I found that the low standard of education could be traced back to the legacy of colonization. In addition to that, the lack of human capital due to the 14-year civil war and the recent Ebola outbreak worsened the education system specifically higher education. This situation has caused the Government of Liberia (GOL) to focus their attention and resources on improving basic and secondary education, thereby neglecting the issues facing HE in Liberia. According to the UNICEF 2011 report, Liberia is one of the poorest countries in the world and there is still concern that the MDGs relevant to basic education and gender equality program may not be met (p. 4). Even with the GOL current focus on providing basic and secondary education, its low budget allocations to the education sector compared to other post-conflict nations (Liberia factsheet, 2012; Roberts et al., 1964) is not making a significant difference.

In exploring Virtual and Distance Education (VDE) for higher education institutions in Liberia, I found that Liberia is lacking the necessary tools and requirements needed to accommodate VDE programs. According to the Liberian Transportation Authority (LTA), due to

the massive destruction during the 14-year civil war, there is extremely limited telecommunication service in the various counties in Liberia, and the rural areas have no fixed line service or Internet access (n.d.). Essential to maintaining an effective and efficient VDE program requires functional electrical grid, roads, ICT infrastructures and ICT in education policies – all of which Liberia lacks. That said, my findings indicate that VDE in Liberia’s HEIs must be a plan for the future. As Moyo states, the full potential for virtual and distance education program in Sub-Saharan Africa has not been realized because the ICT systems have not been fully exploited (2003). The GOL and HEIs in Liberia will have to work together to improve the ICT systems in both urban and rural areas in order to pave the way for introducing VDE in the near future.

The research findings under the three themes below addressed the issues of effective leadership, ICT system requirements and financial sustainability in HEIs, and attempts to answer the three research questions:

Lack of Social Justice Leadership

The practice of social justice leadership is not the norm in Liberia’s HEIs. As Furman (2012) explains, “leadership for social justice is action oriented and transformative, committed and persistent, inclusive and democratic, relational and caring, reflective, and oriented toward a socially just pedagogy” (p. 195). As far as leadership in HEIs is concern, my observation of the history of Liberia up to now has not measure up to Furman’s definition of social justice leadership. Most of all, the negative impact of colonization and the 14-year civil war caused the massive increase in the illiteracy rate, which in 2004 was at 72% (Ndebe, 2010).

Social justice leadership as praxis must form the foundation of leadership in educational institutions, governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies and the nation at large. All of these agencies must work together to address social issues such as the lack of quality and accessible education, gender disparity in the education system, marginalization, sexuality and so on. Social justice leadership as praxis fosters the ability in leadership to care and empathize with the people we serve, and work for equity, inclusivity and social justice in the society. As of 2012 Liberia had not signed any of the instruments that would allow Liberians to file complaints for Human Rights abuses at the international level, hence the domestic laws particularly the constitution does not incorporate international Human Rights laws with regards to education (Liberia Rights to Education Factsheet).

Social justice leadership addresses the research question: *what approach to higher education policy would benefit the Liberian higher education system?* Higher education policies must advocate for the practice of social justice leadership in Liberia's governing and policy-making bodies. Policies enacted and implemented must reflect a just and equitable society thereby ensuring higher education (among other social needs) is accessible to all learners (young and adult) especially learners in rural areas. With this mindset, public servants would refrain from mismanaging public funds, embezzlement, corruption and other attitudes that go against the practice of social justice leadership.

Further to Furman's (2012) discussion on social justice leadership as praxis, governmental and educational leadership in Liberia could initiate this leadership style by building caring relationships with oneself through critical self-reflections; with other colleagues through dialogues at the interpersonal level; with the public through social justice programs at the communal level; systemic relationships through policies changes; and with the environment

through sustainable practices. Liberia's educational institutions must develop social justice programs for all learning institutions (be it formal, informal or non-formal learning institutions). Social justice programs in learning institutions can create awareness of social injustice, and can engage learners, teachers and staff to act as social justice activists.

Disconnect between Policy and Practice

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section of this study, policy and practice must work hand-in-hand. In the case of Liberia, there are quite a few policies that can be instrumental in moving the nation forward, but the lack of practice is hindering this progress. In addition to the educational policies discussed in Chapter 2, there are many other policies that addresses the right to quality and accessible education in urban and rural Liberia, but implementation of these policies is slow due to the disconnect between policy and practice. Other reasons have been associated to the lack of funding, lack of human capital and such. Personally, I do not think the issue of lack of funding or human capital would be resolved if HEIs leadership lacks the capacity to enforce the policies that governs HE operations. HEIs leadership in Liberia must realize how vital HE is for development and national prosperity. A practical example of a disconnect in Liberia's policy and practice can be seen in how the Free and Compulsory School Law implemented in 2001 had to be re-enforced in 2006 by the MOE because many of the public elementary schools were still illegally charging school fees.

Since the 18th century, Liberia's HEIs have faced problems such as the lack of funding, inadequate teaching facilities and laboratories, lack of research materials and teaching supplies, and even now into the 21st century, Liberia's HEIs are still experiencing the same issues. As Flomo (2013) affirms, Liberia is still suffering from the lack of qualified instructors, lack of

adequate textbooks and relevant academic research materials, and the lack of student support services. The legacy of colonization, the devastating and destructive civil war as well as the recent Ebola crisis continues to weaken HEIs. In order for HEIs to get out of these predicaments, the leadership will have to figure out a strategic plan on how to fund higher education in Liberia. As government funding is not always reliable, HE leadership will have to become less reliant on government funding and more self-reliant. Financing HE is even more problematic for nations in SSA than it is in other parts of the world (Teferra, 2013; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). As a result, policy implementation is slow and that creates a gap between policy and practice. If HEIs had other sustainable funding sources, they would be in the position to implement many of the set policies, thereby providing quality and accessible higher education. In moving forward into the knowledge-based era, HEIs must become self-reliant with respect to mobilizing funding and implementing policies. Accessible education in Liberia urban and rural areas must be the number one priority for HEIs.

In addressing the issues of disconnect between policy and practice, funding HE in Liberia is the key solution. The research question asked: *how could funding be mobilized to support higher education in urban and rural Liberia?* As discussed in Chapter 2, one of the suggestions is to mobilize funding from renewable natural resources (Temu, 2006). See Chapter 2 for other suggestions. To reiterate, HEIs in Liberia need a fiscal reform, need to be less reliant on government funding, and need to embrace cost sharing and out sourcing business strategies. Higher education leadership must begin to engage the international community to support advanced education as well as basic education, as both are essential to the progress of education in Liberia.

Lack of National ICTs in Education Policy

Through my exploration of virtual and distance education in urban and rural HEIs in Liberia, I found that the lack of national ICTs in education policy is a major concern. Even though I established the benefits and success VDE could bring to HE in Liberia, VDE can only be successful if the necessary requirements are met. The lack of national ICTs in education policy is the first requirement, as it guides the effective and efficient use of ICT. Other requirements include the availability of electricity, ICTs infrastructures and reliable Internet connectivity – none of which Liberia have met thus far. It is a well-known fact that ICTs are key to transforming the delivery of education (Williams et al., 2011; van Brakel & Chisenga, 2003; Mangesi, 2007; World Bank, 2001; LTA, n.d.), and are also key in the delivery of virtual and distance education programs.

This does not mean that Liberia should rule out the idea of developing VDE programs in HEIs, it only means that Liberia must work towards ensuring these requirements are met before launching into such a major investment. The concepts “information age” or “knowledge based society” are the driving forces behind virtual and distance education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hicks, 2007; Moyo, 2003; Simmons et al., 2011; SES, 2014). VDE is certainly a great investment for secondary, tertiary and adult education institutions. It would reduce the number of students waiting to further their post-secondary education, provide online research material for researchers and would afford the government and HEIs time to reconstruct additional educational infrastructures. Hicks state that, the success of VDE programs in HEIs “must be addressed through a combination of national education and ICT policies [and practices], as well as national strategies for fostering the cultural mindset toward the utilization of ICT not only to access education but also many other social services” (2007, p. 156).

In addressing the research question: *what other models of learning can promote education for all in urban and rural Liberia?* Virtual and Distance Education (VDE) is that model of learning that can promote education for all in urban and rural HEIs in Liberia - although not feasible at this point in time. The Liberian education ministry and the commission for higher education must strengthen the capacity of the available educational facilities while at the same time working towards meeting the requirements for developing VDE programs in the near future. Similar to Liberia, 25% of high school graduates in SSA will not make it to the university level because of limited access in HEIs and/or no access to HE in rural areas (Simmons et al., 2011). As discussed in this study, the successful use of virtual and distance education can be seen in various distance learning institutions such as the African Virtual University (AVU), the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Victoria Early Child Development Virtual University (UVic ECDVU). Higher education institutions in Liberia can learn from these distance-learning institutions and could even collaborate and partner with them.

Strengthening the educational capacity specifically higher education begins with the practice of social justice leadership in the day-to-day activities. The combination of social justice leadership as praxis, effective leadership through policy and practice, reliable ICT systems and mobilizing sustainable funding for HEIs in Liberia, are the approaches to HE policies that could benefit the Liberian people and provide quality and accessible HE to the urban and rural areas in Liberia.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the existing research literature, presents major conclusions based on research findings and provides recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, students, and suggest future research.

Discussion of Findings

I strongly believe that education is the key to Liberia's success, and until a large number of Liberians have access to education, particularly higher education (HE), Liberia will continue to have a slow recovery process from the 14 year long civil war. The purpose of this research was to explore Virtual and Distance Education (VDE) as a means to bridge the gap between urban and rural areas with respect to HE in Liberia. The research has shown that, while VDE will benefit Liberia's higher education system, the nation currently do not have the capacity to develop and maintain it. Since the 14 year long civil war ended in 2003, the current GOL inherited infrastructure that was in a state of total disrepair. For example, social amenities such as the health facilities, water, sanitation systems, power and schools – were all destroyed or in need of significant repair. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Policies and regulations for efficiently delivering these systems and services were either outdated or were no longer in existence or enforceable. Managerial, planning and technical capacities were severely weakened and depleted" (2007, p. 97). Consequently, the GOL is left to decide what sector is to be prioritized, and in what order. The GOL current priorities are health care, safe drinking water, jobs, basic education and the list goes on. Higher education is not yet a priority, and very little have been done to improve the situation.

One major problem facing higher education institutions (HEIs) in Liberia is the total reliance on government funding, as shown in this study. When government funding for HEIs is

delayed or not forthcoming, operations are literally held at a standstill. Resolving issues such as the lack of human capital, inadequate teaching facilities and supplies, and limited capacity to accommodate high demand for higher education, requires sustainable operational funding. As discussed in chapter 2, there is an urgent need for leadership in HEIs to work out a plan to mobilize sustainable funding. Leadership in HEIs can no longer afford to sit back and hope for government funding to manage the affairs of the institution. Meanwhile, the number of students demanding higher education or adult education, continue to increase drastically. International aid, government funding and tuition payments are the three main funding sources for HEIs in Liberia.

The talk about how successful and beneficial VDE programs are in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), made me hopeful that Liberia's HEIs could benefit. Based on the research, the success and benefits from VDE programs can only be realized if certain requirements are met. As at the time this study was conducted, Liberia's national commission for higher education (NCHE) was still in the process of reviewing applications and granting permission to private entities wanting to operate as VDE institutions. As the literature shows, this is a brilliant decision because the GOL need to ensure that ICT in education policies are in place, ICT infrastructures are functional, Internet connectivity are reliable, awareness programs on the effective use of the Internet for educational purposes are underway, and the consequences of cyber-crime clarified. It is evident that computers, ICTs and VDE are key to transforming the delivery of education in our 21st century knowledge economy. Regardless of whether VDE in Liberia is a present or future plan, leadership in HEIs still have a responsibility to ensure quality HE is accessible in urban and rural Liberia.

Summary

In conclusion, while Liberians prepare for the future of VDE in urban and rural settings, the current higher education system must be strengthened to effectively serve and provide quality service to individuals seeking advanced education. As stated in the findings chapter of this study, adopting the practice of social justice leadership, bridging the gap between policy and practice, and enacting national ICT in education policies and infrastructures – are steps in the right direction with respect to building a knowledge-based society in Liberia. The recommendations below are useful for higher education practitioners, policy makers and students in Liberia.

Recommendations

Given the findings of the research study, recommendations related to three areas are considered for: (i) practitioners, (ii) policy makers and (iii) future research.

For practitioners. With respect to practitioners (higher education leadership, educators and staff), it is suggested that the practice of social justice leadership form the foundation for leading and building caring relationships among colleagues, students, staff and the community. It is through this kind of leadership and relationship building that people are engaged and inspired thereby willing to financially support HE projects. In other words, fundraising projects that invest in HE, ICTs, VDE and other research studies that benefit urban and rural HEIs. In addition to this, practitioners must embrace operational transparency and accountability measures to help minimize corruption, mismanagement and embezzlement of public funds. More importantly, practitioners in HEIs must work towards becoming financially self-reliant, as opposed to completely relying on government funding.

For policy makers. Similarly, it is suggested that policy makers (ministry, higher education board) must enact and enforce educational policies specifically a national ICT in education policy. These policies would guide the operations, designs and cultural relevance of ICT and VDE programs in Liberia's HEIs. Policy makers must bridge the gap between policy and practice by leading by example, and by fostering the practice of social justice leadership at the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic and ecological levels of society. And finally, policy makers must enact policies that ensure fair wages for educators in Liberia - wages that is comparable to that of other neighboring countries in SSA.

Another group that is always missing from the conversation of improving higher education in Liberia, are students. Students or learners are the recipients of higher education and must have a voice in the movement for change. Practitioners must validate students' contributions in the decision making process of HEIs. And students must become engage in exercising their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens and as students, and must contribute their quota to the post-conflict reconstruction agenda. Furthermore, the expectation of student receiving loans or scholarship from the GOL is that, they must do diligence in paying their loans back, and must give back to the community upon completing their studies.

For future research. With respect to suggested future research, one area stemming out of this study and would be great to investigate is, the massive failure of Liberia's secondary school graduates who took the university entrance examinations in 2013 (all 15,000 students failed) and 2014 (12,000 students failed, only 7 passed). One research question worth investigating is: *was this massive failure really due to poor quality secondary education, or was the standard of the examination intentionally made difficult to deter the large number of students seeking advanced education?* This issue is of concern to Liberia's education system, higher

education institutions, the international community and the Liberian people. Unfortunately, not much has been done to resolve this issue, or researched to figure out where the problem lies.

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Appendix

Map of Liberia

