# KEYNOTE ADDRESS
# AT THE
# 11TH INTERNATIONAL AND
# INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE
# AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MAKENI

**BY**

Ing. Prof. Jonas Abioseh Sylvanus Redwood-Sawyerr, *CRSL*

*BENG (USL), MSc (Lond), PhD (Essex), PENG, MIET, CENG, FSLIE*

*Theme:*

**Higher Education Development and Society:**
**Enhancing Policy, Research, Exploring Funding for Community Impact in Africa**

**TUESDAY 27TH OCTOBER 2026**

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## Salutation

Mr Vice Chancellor, Chairperson of the 11th International Interdisciplinary Conference of the Inter-University Consortium Africa, Vice Chancellors or Representatives of Universities here present, delegates, academic and administrative staff of UniMak, students, members of the 4th Estate, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me thank the Vice Chancellor and the UniMak Administration for inviting me to serve as the Keynote Speaker in this 11th edition of the International and Interdisciplinary Conference being held in the beautiful City of Makeni. I must hasten to say that the Vice Chancellor and I come a long way in our strides at transforming the education landscape in Sierra Leone through establishing strategic partnerships towards reform of the sector.

## Introduction

## Higher Education development in Africa

Permit me to draw references from an address I gave at the 31st Convocation at the University of Port Harcourt in 2017 on the mandate of early universities in Africa as those findings resonate very well with the theme of this year's Conference.

The early universities and colleges were largely faith-based such as the North African University of Al Quaraouiyine established in 895 AD in Fes, Morocco. It is recorded by UNESCO and the Guinness book of records, as the world's oldest university still in operation, predating Oxford, Bologna, or the Sorbonne by several centuries[1]. Next is the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt in founded in 972 AD. This university is now the chief centre of Arabic literature and Islamic learning in the world. In Sub Saharan Africa, during the 16th century the University of Timbuktu flourished as a centre of learning in Islamic studies in the sub region and beyond.

Fourah Bay College, later a constituent of the University of Sierra Leone was founded in 1872 and the University of Cape Town, South Africa which was established in 1829, becoming a fully-fledged research and teaching institution between 1880—1900 are two of the oldest universities in Sub-Sahara Africa. Others in the continent include the American University of Cairo in 1919, Makarere University, Uganda, 1922, University of Ghana, 1948 and the Uniiversity of Ibadan, Nigeria also in 1948.

Whereas the earliest North African Universities were created around the operations of mosques and madrasas, Fourah Bay College was established by the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) for the training of clergy, catechists and civil servants during the colonial era. These institutions had clearly defined faith-based mandates which determined their foci and to a large extent the composition of their students.

In his report, Lord Dearing [Dearing, 1997] indicated four main purposes of Higher Education (HE) as :

[1] https://www.moroccomuseum.com/en/sites/universite-al-quaraouiyine-fes

1. *to inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well-equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment ;*
2. *to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society ;*
3. *to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels ;*
4. *to play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.*

Contextually these attributes of HEIs could be translated to read:

1. Providing quality education, life-long learning and employable skills so as to contribute to national development and wealth creation;
2. Promoting Research and innovation towards national development
3. Providing national and international service that will cater for a dynamic and information-driven society
4. Promoting peace, equality, respect for human rights and justice.

Needless to mention that these are attributes that are embedded in many mission and vision statements of universities around the world albeit modified to meet their peculiarities and cultural inclinations.

## Some retrospection on Fourah Bay College and its mandate

My distinguished Colleagues, Let me crave your indulgence for a moment to visit the mandate of the oldest university south of the Sahara that provided a western-style education to the region and farther afield when it was

established, and will be celebrating its bi-centenary next year, and briefly that of the University of Timbuktu as we look at the development of higher education in the continent.

In an article published by the Durham University Journal of 16th December 1876 entitled 'The Fourah Bay College, History and Development,' the following were the opening lines:

*'It was about the year 1815 that an institution under the auspices of the Church Missionary Society, was founded in Sierra Leone for the purpose of educating negro children who were from time to time rescued by the capture of slave ships. For this purpose a school house built on the national plain, and a chapel, were erected in a healthy position on Leicester Mountain, almost three miles from Freetown, where the Society had received a considerable grant of land.'*

The mandate of this institution was very clearly defined and its instruction was to be a carbon copy of that practised in British Schools albeit with the exception *that some useful manual labour* was to constitute a half of each day.

The article went on to note:

*'Conducted in this manner, the* ***Christian Institution*** *as it was named, became a great success; so much so that in 1816 the number who enjoyed its benefits had reached 200. The Institution was the only one of its kind in Africa. In the opinion of some, it was a very doubtful speculation; but the success which it attained at such an early date was remarkable and a sufficient answer to those who had hesitated as to the advisability of attempting to educate an African.'*

The fortunes of the institution were chequered and it was relocated to an area in Freetown known as Fourah Bay near the coast thereby marking the beginning of Fourah Bay College in 1827 with its first principal Rev C L F

Haensel. In 1876 a landmark event also captured by the journal article was that of the affiliation of Fourah Bay College to the University of Durham on 16th May 1876 during the principalship of Rev M Sunter, where it was established, that instruction will be exactly as was done in Durham to the extent that the article states :

*'The instruction will now be in exact conformity with that pursued at Durham, and the negroes of Western Africa will no longer be unable to avail themselves of a sound university education.'*

The article ended with the following:

*'And it will be no little credit to the University of Durham for history to have to record that she was the first to throw open to Africa the full privileges of a liberal education.'*

These developments were not entirely welcomed though by all and some interesting comments were made in the *London Times* which had been reported as being very opposed to the work of the CMS in Africa. It trivialised this landmark event by stating that it would not be much longer before the University of Durham was affiliated to the Zoo.

It is important to note that the era during which these developments occurred was also the official end of the slave trade and the misconception of the capacity and mental development of the African was still a subject of derision and denial in some quarters. The scholarship at Fourah Bay College was therefore very significant and provided a strong evidence of the potential of the African and rebuffed in factual terms some of the myths that had been forwarded to justify the inhumane slave trade, based on a lesser mental potential of the Black man.

The distinction of alumni and the impressive scholarship of its staff were revered and created a magnetic effect for attracting students and researchers for learning and scholarly work from Africa and beyond. During its support by the CMS, these attributes, coupled with the range of courses offered at FBC such as Hebrew, Latin, Greek, Arabic, History, Geography, Comparative Philology, Moral of Philosophy, Political economy, Logic, Mathematics, some branches of natural sciences, French and German endeared it to the accolade 'The Athens of West Africa,' as its activities mirrored to a large extent the character of the acropolis Athens and its central role in European scholarship and debate.

Some of the alumni of FBC during the 19th and early 20th century, became prolific writers and scholars, others returned to other regions in Africa especially Nigeria, The Gambia and Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast), to become leaders in their various professions especially in the field of education, religion, medicine and the civil service.

The University of Timbuktu and its mandate

The University had a student roll of 250,000 in a city of 100,000. Although not structured in the modern sense of a university it was however a centre of learning and operated around three masajid or mosques. In addition to the teachings of the Quran, other subjects were taught such as medicine and surgery, astronomy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, philosophy, language and linguistics, geography, history, as well as art [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Timbuktu].

During Europe's Middle Ages, the University of Timbuktu was home to a rich writing tradition that saw the creation of millions of manuscripts, hundreds of thousands of which survive to present day. An Islamic city, with three large

mosques, the study of the Q'uran formed the bedrock of this learning tradition with its scholars composing, copying and importing works on many subjects including astronomy, mathematics, law, geography and what we would think of as history. [http://www.livescience.com/26451-timbuktu.html]

This centre of Islamic studies had its own share of mixed fortunes, first during its colonisation by the French when many of the manuscripts were transferred to France and then through violent means by the Al Qaeda Magreb Islamic group. Fortunately many thousands of the scripts had been secured before the attacks by the Al Quaeda group. The University continues to attract researchers and scholars from all over the world to its libraries, although recent unrest has further led to the loss of many more precious transcripts and historical documents.

**Newer mandates of universities and their development trajectory**

While the core values of many of the earlier universities remain, albeit with different degrees of visibility, their foci have been forced to change or expand due to the increasing demands for diversity in education, the conditions for funding, and competition from newer HEIs both at national and international levels, and from the upsurge of private HEIs often with more business or corporate-oriented mandates and strategies. Private HEIs quite often have specialists focus on subjects such as Commercial Studies, Computer Science, Business, etc. Their funding model is quite different from their public counterparts and especially for the faith-based HEIs, support is often obtained from the international parent body. Most are run as corporate entities with quite efficient financial management. These demands have reshaped the mission and vision of many universities as can be seen through the lenses of their strategic plans often covering a 5-10 year window tagged as short, medium and

long term with conditions for review to meet emerging issues that may impact on the their relevance and competitiveness.

The emphasis on Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) or its corollary, Science Technology Innovation and Research (STIR) comes with its own level of challenges not least of all funding.

Though stated almost 30 years ago, the following key roles that HEIs are expected to perform if they are to remain relevant and progressive are relevant today, as they were, when enumerated by Lord Dearing in 1977. [Dearing, 1997]:

1. Drivers of and incubators of innovation and capacity building in STEM.

2. Generate knowledge through research and innovation to create technologies that will transform national economies from their state of dependency on foreign support, to one of providing services to promote emerging technologies that will add value to the processing of raw material often prevalent in our countries.

3. Promote the notion of life-long learning and continuing professional development.

4. Explore the diverse needs and location of its clients and providing a variety of choices through outreach programmes or multi-site campuses, contemporary forms of pedagogy (Team-based and problem based learning, online facilities such as the use of massive open online courses - MOOCS) and flexible learning experiences by using technologies, such as eLearning, to promote these options especially to unserved communities and disadvantaged groups.

5. Migrate from the traditional teacher-centred learning to a student-centred approach to teaching and learning.

6. Recognize the explosion, access and diversity of knowledge created by the internet and transforming modes of teaching from the position of custodian of knowledge to one of guidance of students in their search for knowledge so as to develop the culture of critical thinking.

7. Identify the technical strengths of our institutions and the communities they serve in allocating resources to fund research and programmes offered, that will yield the greatest impact on our societies.

8. Make the issue of matching employers and students expectations paramount in the curriculum we offer.

## The overarching mandate of Quality Assurance in HEIs

Universities do not operate within a vacuum and in Africa where resources are often constrained especially in public universities, administrators face the challenges of establishing relevant programmes that attract students, ensuring a high quality that will ensure accreditation by both national accreditation bodies, as well as have the potential of being transformed for submission for international accreditation and finally programmes that meet the expectations of students and the job market.

There are also a number of factors that impact on the growth, relevance and popularity of programmes offered by universities such as :

i. Staff quality and mix

ii. Research, innovation and publication

iii. National and International accreditation and ranking of programmes

iv. Employability of graduates

v. Funding

vi. Relevance and flexibility of curriculum

vii. Political interference and intervention

The establishment of universities in many African countries, has become in many instances a matter of national pride and in many cases a post-colonial endeavour to re-shape the focus of education to be more reflective of national goals and aspirations as well as cultural enhancement. Very few universities existed in Africa prior to independence as mentioned earlier. In more recent observation regional/ethnic identity has become one of the drivers for the establishment of universities in African countries often times without the proper planning and national budgeting for its sustainable operations and quality assurance. Political expediency has also featured as a strong pre-cursor for the choice of location of universities in the continent. With the state of the economies and the competing demands of healthcare, infrastructure and national security, such actions are often counterproductive to the overall national agenda as standards are compromised with the attendant effect on quality delivery.

As universities endeavour to establish their relevance and competitive edge, efforts are made at aligning their academic and professional programmes to international standards and external scrutiny in a bid to achieving world-wide recognition thereby creating a platform for attracting quality teachers and students. There are a number of such accrediting institutions with a variety of foci and areas of jurisdiction. Some are discipline specific while others have a broad portfolio of programmes that can be considered within their mandate. However, ensuring Quality Assurance of programmes across national boundaries raises challenges of ensuring international standards, provision of

adequate resources to support programmes offered, the qualification and experience of staff and the competition of nationals with international students for spaces offered in these universities, once their international status is known and their research portfolio and relevance to national and international development

## Enhancing research in the African continent and the Science Granting Council Initiative (SGCI)

The Science Granting Council Initiative launched in 2015 is a multilateral initiative that aims to strengthen the capacities of science funding agencies in sub-Saharan Africa to support research and evidence that can be used to inform policies that will contribute to economic and social development.. *[https://sgciafrica.org/]*

Its main funders have been:

- United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)
- Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
- South Africa's National Research Foundation (NRF-SA)
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
- Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad)
- German Research Foundation (DFG)

Recently in the Accra All Partners Forum meeting in September, 2025, the Welcome Trust announced its partnership with the SGCI and will be supporting research activities in the health sector.

As the Initiative celebrated ten years of supporting research in Africa it undertook a deep introspection of the status of research in the Continent and in particular of the SGCs that it has been supporting. There are now 20 SGCs

from West, East and Southern Africa that make up the SGCI family including Sierra Leone (the National Science Technology and Innovation Council-NSTIC-SL, which is within the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education), and new entrants have been Angola, and Togo with the Kingdom of Eswatini (former Swaziland), Democratic Republic of Congo, The Gambia, Lesotho, and Benin having an Observer status. The achievements of these SGC have been significant giving credence to the structure and operational model of the Initiative.

An excerpt of the Concept Note for the SGCI III is as follows:

*Phase III of the Science Granting Councils Initiative in sub-Saharan Africa (SGCI-3), running from 2026 to 2030, will build on the strong foundation established by previous phases. SGCI-3 is intended to further strengthen the roles of Africa's Science Granting Councils in national science, technology, and innovation systems (STI) and increase their contribution to economic and social development in sub-Saharan Africa. By targeting key gaps in Africa's STI, SGCI-3 will:*

- *Support high-quality research and innovation that addresses national and continental development priorities.*
- *Enhance the SGCs' visibility, strategic leadership, and influence in Africa's STI policy.*
- *Strengthen SGCs' research and innovation management systems, practices, and services.*
- *Integrate SGCI's activities into national and regional processes to promote African ownership and ensure long-term sustainability.*

*Overall, SGCI-3 is intended to consolidate the achievements of earlier phases as well as position the Councils as strategic drivers of resilient and inclusive STI systems across the continent*

There are five (5) priority areas under the SGCI III viz.:

i. Support national research and innovation
ii. Promote intra-African collaboration
iii. Expand equitable partnership between Africa and global partners
iv. Empower SGCI Councils to shape STI Policies and
v. Continue support for capacity strengthening.

## Bridging the employment expectation divide

Many universities are constantly faced with the challenge of producing a curriculum that fully addresses the dichotomy of meeting the academic needs of students wishing to pursue postgraduate programmes after graduation, and ensuring an immediacy of productive employment after graduation. While technical colleges are focussed on the latter, universities provide a much wider and often broad-based education aimed at providing graduates with a foundation that can be built upon both in industry and in research institutions. Unfortunately the job market often complains of the practical inadequacy of university graduates and the need for further training before they can contribute to the productive output of their employers. While some employers require rather ambitious qualities of graduates including project management, proficiency in industry-focused software applications and advanced design skills, the fact still remains that the university needs to revisit its approach to training graduates and work more closely with employers both at the Government level and the private sector.

## Challenges of graduate employability and training

A combination of field-specific-knowledge and soft skills such as team work, commitment, communication and presentation skills, vision and problem solving skills feature strongly in the list of qualities that companies look for in

their employees [Weligamage Susima and Gununta Siengthai, 2003, Yorke and Mantz, 2006] in addition to their field-specific skills.

These are generally typical requirements of most employing companies especially in engineering. Sadly universities and other further education institutions do not assign much time to developing these skills as they try to provide an education which will meet the demands of the profession for those wishing to move into professional practice after graduation, as well as cater for students who wish to embark upon postgraduate programmes leading to higher educational certification. There is therefore a need to align university curricula and graduate employability through strong partnerships between universities and the corporate world. Contemporary approaches to pedagogy that provide opportunities to develop these soft skills must be explored and introduced in our programmes. Students must be made to participate during lectures using various approaches such as team-based exercises, role playing, power point presentations, group projects ending with presentations by the groups with each member presenting aspects of the work or research undertaken to the class. This will assist in ensuring that they fully understand the concepts introduced, as well as build their communication, team-based and presentation skills and self-confidence.

## Global impact issues

In an article *'Making a case for an internationalised curriculum,'* in the University News of .24th February 2017, Allen Schaidle, (2017) suggests that HEIs should target not at developing a unified curriculum but harmonisation of graduate attributes and competencies that resonate with international criteria for employment and further studies. He argues that the process of internationalising the curriculum does not entail

a standard catalogue of courses or concepts. Rather, the process and final product incorporates assorted events, emphasising internationalisation and graduates attributes that are useful in a globalised society.

Global problems such as climate change, global warming, water management and cross border resources management, sustainable production and consumption, energy security and the implications of a nation's ecological footprint and its impact on the sustainability of natural resources and application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) have demonstrated and underscored the need for a global perspective and focus in the training of students to meet the new definitions of an international graduate.

Accreditation bodies generally refer to the acquisition of equivalent or minimum academic standards of programmes offered by the institutions being examined and a check list of competencies and attributes that graduates should have gained on completion of the courses under observation for the award of a degree, diploma or certificate. These are internationally agreed requirements as can be seen for example in the graduate attributes specified in the Washington, Sydney and Dublin Accord for engineers, engineering technologists and technicians respectively.

**Afrca's renaissance and the AU Agenda 2063**

Permit me to make a brief reference to the African Union's Agenda 2063 which provides a road map for Africa's renaissance but however restrict my emphasis to education.

Article 14 states :

*Africa's human capital will be fully developed as its most precious resource, through sustained investments based on universal early childhood development and basic education, and sustained investments in higher education, science, technology,*

*research and innovation, and the elimination of gender disparities at all levels of education. Access to post-graduate education will be expanded*
*and strengthened to ensure world-class infrastructure for learning and research and support scientific reforms that underpin the transformation of the* continent.

Article 72 c

*Catalyse education and skills revolution and actively promote science, technology, research and innovation, to build knowledge, human capital, capabilities and skills to drive innovations and for the African century:*

The following are proposed as the pathway to achieving that goal:

- *Expand universal access to quality early childhood, primary and secondary education;*
- *Expand and consolidate gender parity in education;*
- *Strengthen technical and vocational education and training through scaled up investments, establishment of a pool of high-quality TVET centres across Africa, foster greater links with industry and alignment to labour markets, with a view to improve the skills profile, employability and entrepreneurship of especially youth and women, and closing the skills gap across the continent;*
- *Build and expand an African knowledge society through transformation and investments in universities, science, technology, research and innovation; and through the harmonization of education standards and mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications;*
- *Establish an African Accreditation Agency to develop and monitor educational quality standards, with a view to expanding student and academic mobility across the continent;*

- *Strengthen the Pan African University, build the Pan African Virtual University, and elevate Africa's role in global research, technology development and transfer, innovation and knowledge production; and*
- *Harness universities and their networks and other options to enable high quality university education.*

While Universities' mandates have been modified over the centuries to reflect emerging trends and demands of the sector as entrenched in their mission and vision statements as well as analysed in their Strategic Plans, the overriding focus in the recent decades has been to provide programmes that will produce job-ready graduates that are internationally competitive as well as having a strong foundation to embark on postgraduate studies where desirable. With the almost prohibitive fees charged for overseas education, African Universities must revisit their mission and funding framework to provide internationally accredited programmes, thereby affording their citizens the opportunity to obtain degrees locally, and compete with their counterparts world-wide in response to the culture of globalisation. The end result of such renaissance may be the creation of a reverse brain drain to Africa by international scholars thereby regaining the continent's former accolade of the *cradle of civilisation*.
Governments in partnership with university administrations and businesses, would have to devise innovative approaches to funding their programmes and establishing a healthy balance in producing job-ready graduates and those with a desire to pursue a career in academia.

In concluding. I wish to leave delegates with the following questions, which I hope will influence some of your discussions during this conference while reflecting on the theme of the conference:

1. Is the education offered by our Higher Education Institutions fit-for-purpose in our contemporary society?
2. Are our curricula dynamic and responsive to market demands and how often do we review them?
3. Are our graduates gratified with the knowledge gained on graduation when they enter the job market, especially in the case of professional programmes such as engineering, technology and the sciences, i.e.
    i. Are they equipped with the required soft skills and hands-on exposure to be attractive to employers?
    ii. Do we provide adequate infrastructure in terms of workshops and laboratories to enhance practical experimentation?
4. Do our HEIs make provisions for micro-credentials and digital badges as components of their policy on Recognition of Prior Learning?
5. Do we have National Qualifications frameworks (NQFs) that are linked with pathways for inter-sub framework mobility?(Expand)
6. Do our HE systems have policies on Accumulated Credit Transfer within and outside our borders? (Comment)
7. Is there a system of mutual recognition of qualifications offered by our HEIs, through an accepted framework of Benchmark Minimum Academic and Professional Standards as we look towards the regionalisation and internationalisation of our education systems?
8. Are our research scope targeted at solving community and societal problems in addition to addressing developing issues using emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, machine learning software tools and platforms?

Fellow academics and university administrators, while churning these questions in your minds, let me once again thank the Vice Chancellor and Management of UniMak in inviting me to address this International Interdisciplinary Conference on its 11th edition. I wish you very productive deliberations and I look forward to your Communique and Conference Proceedings. I also wish travelling mercies to all our delegates especially those who have travelled by land, air and sea to get to Sierra Leone.

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