

## **MTHE Deserves Commendation**

***By Sahr Sewa***

Quality in both higher and technical education has become quite crucial in Sierra Leone's strategic plans towards catching up with what obtains in the developed world. The output of the country's educational service, which constitutes the evidence of quality, is linked up with the tremendous achievements the Government of Sierra Leone has made so far through the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education (MTHE). As a Ministry responsible to train the workforce of this country, MTHE's team-based approach has over the years placed it in a steadfast position; the Ministry's successes rest on its staff strength and collaborative spirit.

Three years ago, MTHE was established as a new Ministry by the Government of Sierra Leone, and since inception, it has shown nothing less than affirmative outputs in a range of implemented and forthcoming activities. The Ministry has manifested leadership in diverse ways through its untiring commitment to reinforcing quality and standard in both technical and higher education in the country.

On 8<sup>th</sup> July, 2021, the Parliament of Sierra Leone, through MTHE's leadership, debated and enacted the Universities Act, 2021. This new Act, having repealed and replaced the Universities Act, 2005, has made provision for the establishment of Milton Margai Technical University, Eastern Technical University and Kono University of Science and Technology, and for the continuation of University of Sierra Leone and Njala University. The Act also makes provision for the Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology. Accordingly, H.E the President ceases to be a Chancellor of all public universities, which allows the universities to have their own Chancellors appointed by the President.

MTHE's achievements can equally be traced to the resolution of an industrial strike action by lecturers of three public universities (University of Sierra Leone, Njala University and Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology) which had been going on for quite an extensive period of time before the Ministry's notable intervention. In April this year, the Government of Sierra Leone did make a salary increment of 50% for lecturers in the aforementioned universities. The Ministry is keen to enhance staff training and capacity development for lecturers in a bid to foster efficiency in technical and higher education institutions across the country.

With regards Technical, Vocational, Education and Training (TVET), which is a subset of MTHE's deliverables, the Ministry is about to construct 6 new Government Technical Institutes (GTIs) in 6 strategic districts/locations across the country, in addition to the 10 already existing ones. Human capital development, being one of Government's national strategic objectives, cannot

be detached from the improvement of TVET infrastructures, which will ultimately enhance skills development for middle level manpower. MTHE takes the lead in developing, promoting and managing skills development through TVET.

The Skills Development Project (SDP) is a \$22 million funded project, of which \$20 million was provided by the World Bank while \$2 million was provided by the Government of Sierra Leone as a counterpart funding.

The Skills Development Fund (SDF) has two 'windows', catering for different target groups. Window 1 supports improvement of the quality and relevance of formal and non-formal TVET, and Window 2 addresses skills gaps and skills shortage experienced by private enterprises in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

Starting with Window 1, the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education has approved grant of about US\$ 12 million to 63 grantees in virtually all districts across the country. Such laudable venture has the potential to support demand-led training and skills development with a view to addressing key challenges in the labor market, particularly to encourage job creation and growth of the country's economy.

Strides to provide an enabling environment for students' capacity building with the knowledge and skills to meet the social and economic needs of society are at the heart of the Government of Sierra Leone. Thus, MTHE has over the years been awarding Grant-in-Aid (GIA) to qualified and deserving students pursuing higher and technical education, especially those that are faced with financial constraints. With an overriding objective to enhance a productive labor force in the country, the Government of Sierra Leone, through MTHE, has awarded 2,750 GIA to undergraduate students for the 2020/2021 academic year. This is quite important, in that part of this amount comprises GIA awarded to Government Technical Institutes (GTIs). The Minister of Technical and Higher Education, Prof. Alpha Tejan Wurie, has always emphasized the need to give credence to hands-on education in the National Qualifications Framework (NQFs). This would allow technical and vocational students to trust that their options are as useful as academic options. According to Prof. Wurie, a child should be able to access a technical university from technical options without taking the WACCSE.

The 2020/2021 academic year, which started in March, 2021, happens to be an abridged academic year. Nonetheless, plans are already in place to end the session in September, 2021 in a bid to provide a smooth transition into the 2021/2022 academic year, which is expected to commence in October this year. This would eventually reposition higher academic institutions to go by the original academic calendar to promote efficiency of learning in the country.

Few months ago, the dynamic Minister of Technical and Higher Education, Prof. Alpha Tejan

Wurie, took a tour around all public universities and polytechnics across the country with a view to entreating their respective administrations to heighten their staff capacity and quality of outputs as well as review their course options in line with the requirements of the labor force. There is no gainsaying that for every programme a university seeks to undertake, there must be possibility of sustainability for it.

Very recently, MTHE, together with the Ministries of Finance and Basic and Senior Secondary Education, did participate in signing a \$ 68 million funding agreement with two consulting firms, vis-à-vis Ideas Ltd & Alhabshree JV and Engineering Consultants Group (ECG) based in Egypt for the design and supervision of various office buildings and classrooms under the Sierra Leone Education Sector Support Project (SLESSP). The project, which was declared effective in February, 2021 and expected to close in March, 2024, is in a bid to improve on the quality and accessibility to education in hard-to-reach communities of the country. The important thing is that such impressive undertaking clearly underscores how passionate MTHE can be in its quest to uphold academic efficacy.

With its stanch belief in striving for academic and technical excellence, the Ministry shall certainly keep thriving in its ventures.