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**The Role of Tertiary Education Institutions in
Teaching Entrepreneurship in Post- Conflict
Environments.**

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The Role of Tertiary Education Institutions in Teaching Entrepreneurship in Post-Conflict Environments.

The Case of Liberia

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Abstract.

This paper explores the role of tertiary institutions in teaching entrepreneurship in Post- Conflict Liberia, one of several Post-Conflict Environments (PCEs) in Africa and abroad. The country wracked with years of civil war, and now seemingly on a path of democracy and economic growth rightfully is turning towards entrepreneurship education as a vehicle to job creation, especially among graduates and the unemployed youth.

Four institutions of tertiary education in Liberia were earmarked by their educational authorities to play a leading role in delivering effective entrepreneurship education in future. A survey (n=28) was conducted among academics of the institutions in order to ascertain a better understanding of their perceptions on entrepreneurship education, the Liberian Post-Conflict labor market and related issues such differences between sub-Saharan labor markets and the loss of skilled individuals and professionals as a result of emigration (*brain drain*). Also the extent to which the academics were willing and able to participate in a program of entrepreneurship education.

The results in general show enthusiasm for entrepreneurship education. Ideally it would seem that a process of *infusing* entrepreneurship into all curricula would be ideal. Special care should also be given to accommodating specific demands of the Liberian labor market, especially given their past history of conflict.

Introduction.

Post-Conflict Environments (PCEs), sometimes also referred to as Post-War Environments (PWEs) have enjoyed considerable attention related to their economic rejuvenation and accompanying efforts regarding economic growth and job creation. Aside from countries such as Kosovo and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the countries situated in Sub-Saharan Africa have experienced conflict varying in intensity and nature. The period between 1990 and 2006 was a particularly trying time in countries

such as Angola, Burundi, the Congo (DR), Cote d' Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Rwanda and Uganda.

One of the many common denominators across the Post-Conflict era of these countries is the vulnerability of the youth. Efforts towards youth development, reconciliation and rehabilitation point to young people at a distinct disadvantage of finding gainful employment against a background of exploitation and the loss of education opportunities (Mac-Ikemenjima (2008).

Entrepreneurship education and specifically tertiary education *vis-à-vis* the challenges of job creation in impoverished environments are well noted in research (Venter, 2012, Fiet, 2001) and the focus of this paper. Given the all too well known phenomena of urbanization in developing countries, stimulation of entrepreneurship activity and the SME sector, becomes pivotal to job creation (Byabashaija, Katano and Isabalija, 2010)

Liberia.

The case of Liberia, West Africa, is of particular relevance to this paper.

The country experienced two devastating civil wars between 1980 and 2005, resulting in an estimated 250 000 deaths and an infrastructure virtually destroyed. Notwithstanding substantial interventions by donor countries, it is still estimated that 85% of Liberians live under the *poverty line* (World Bank, 2008).

Although Liberia recorded its eighth consecutive year of post-war economic growth in 2011, the country remains dependent on the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors, contributing 72% of GDP (OECD, 2012)).

Liberia, as is the case in all of sub-Saharan Africa, youth unemployment is endemic. Of the total population of Africa, young people between the ages of 15 to 25 represent more than 60% (African Economic Outlook, 2013). In the case of Liberia, 63 % of the population is under the age of 25 (OECD, 2012).

In general, Liberia, ranking 182nd out of 187 countries in the 2011 UN Human Development Index, is really one of the poorest countries. With a per capita Gross National Income of USD 265 and 64% earning less than the poverty line of one dollar per day, the table is set for entrepreneurship intervention (Venter, 2012, World Bank, 2012).

Entrepreneurship Education in Liberia – Realities and Perceptions.

This paper is mostly based on the experience of a major intervention in entrepreneurship promotion and job creation as it relates to the youth of Liberia.

SPARK (www.spark-online.org), a Dutch based NGO with its prime objective of the promotion entrepreneurship and higher education in Post Conflict Environments, has been involved with universities in Liberia for some time. Maastricht School of Management (MsM) as a partner in this Endeavour via their International Projects

Department (IPD) is exposed to the challenges facing the youth in Post Conflict Environments.

With the assistance of the Association of Liberian Universities (ALU), four institutions of higher education were identified as potential candidates for capacity building in entrepreneurship education in 2012. They were University of Liberia (Monrovia), Cuttington University (Monrovia), Tubman University (Harper) and Grand Bassa College (Buchanan)
(The criteria to which the four institutions were selected are unclear to the researcher).

Perceptions of Entrepreneurship Education from academics attached to Liberian Universities.

Before embarking on a visit to Liberia in 2012, the researcher requested the distribution of questionnaires among academic staff of the four mentioned institutions. The main objective of the survey was to gain insight into their perceptions of the challenge to teach entrepreneurship in a Post-Conflict environment. Also, insight into the perception(s) regarding the possible difference between the expectations of the labor market in Liberia and other sub-Saharan countries was to be explored.
The researcher accepted that questionnaires would be randomly distributed and rigorous sampling procedures would be practically impossible.

1. Gender.

Surprisingly only 2 (7, 1 percent) out of 28 respondents were female. It is not altogether clear if this has to do only with a hugely skewed distribution of male versus female academics. Given the enormous attention currently diverted towards women and their particular needs as a target group for entrepreneurship in Africa, this is disappointing. However gender and the issue of distribution of university academics falls beyond the scope of this study.

2. Age.

The age of the respondents was less skewed than was the case of gender although there was a lack of younger academics (perhaps denied an education because of the effects of conflict?).

3 respondents (10, 7 percent) were 30 or younger, 8 (28, 6 percent) were between 31 and 40 years of age, 11 (39, 3 percent) were between the age of 41 and 50 years, and 6 (21, 4 percent) were 50 years or over.

Notwithstanding the lack of academics younger than 30, it would seem that quite a large number were educated in the post-conflict era.

3. Area of teaching

Not surprisingly Management and Finance academics were in the majority (11 or 39, 3 percent). Perhaps academics with such a background felt more comfortable with answering questions related to entrepreneurship.

A further 5 respondents (17, 9 percent) were teaching in the field of Information Technology as well as 5 (17, 9 percent) in the field of Agriculture related disciplines. 4 respondents (14, 3 percent) were involved in technical vocational subjects and 3 (10, 3 percent) were involved in other subjects such as Literature, Law and Mathematics).

4. Years of teaching experience.

Respondents were questioned about their teaching experience in the fields mentioned in 3 above.

The response probably reflects the negative effects on the personal development of the academia as a result of the Conflict.

11 (39, 3 percent) indicated that they had 5 years or less teaching experience. This is in contrast to only 3 respondents being under the age of 30. 9 Respondents (32,1 percent) indicated that they had between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience, 6 respondents (21,4 percent) had between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience and only 2 (7,1 percent) had between 16 and 20 years experience. None had more than that.

Given the response on their age, it is quite clear that a large number of respondents joined the Academia at a later stage in their life.

5. Experience working in a business environment.

Of the respondents 19 (68, 9 percent) indicated that they had some prior experience working in a business environment, although not always many years. This augers quite well if such academics are to be empowered to teach an entrepreneurship curriculum. Of the 19 academics that indicated that they had previous experience in a business environment, most (11 or 58, 9 percent) had 1 to 5 years experience, 5 (26, 3 percent) had 6 to 10 years experience, and 3 (15, 8 percent) had 20 years or more experience. The response seems to be in line with the findings indicating that the group entered the academia at a relatively later age.

6. The possibility of students utilizing the content of the subject being taught to employ themselves.

Respondents were asked to what extent they believe the content of the subject they teach could be utilized for the purposes of self employment.

The response was very satisfying seen against the background of developing and fine tuning curricula across the board towards entrepreneurship and self-employment.

18 Respondents (64, 3 percent) indicated that they totally agree and the rest (10 or 35, 7 percent) agreed. Thus not a single respondent was neutral or disagreed that their subject matter would not contribute to self-employment.

7. Responsibility for teaching entrepreneurship.

Respondents were asked if they believe it is the responsibility of each and every lecturer to teach entrepreneurship.

Although the respondents significantly indicated that they either totally agreed (13 or 46, 4 percent) or agreed (9 or 32, 1 percent) that all lecturers had the responsibility to teach entrepreneurship. Some (3 or 10, 7 percent) were not sure, whilst 2 (7, 1 percent) disagreed and one (3, 6 percent) totally disagreed. The responses that represented uncertainty or disagreement were not limited to non business or any other subject. Perhaps a flaw in the questionnaire was the fact that the question related to the above did not differentiate between the responsibility and/or ability and willingness to teach entrepreneurship.

8. Should entrepreneurship education be the responsibility of a single Unit or Department?

It would seem that considerable disagreement exists regarding the issue of one department or unit being responsible for entrepreneurship education, notwithstanding the fact that respondents mostly agreed that each and every lecturer should be responsible for such education. 5 Respondents (17,9 percent) totally agreed that teaching entrepreneurship should be the sole responsibility of a singular Department or Unit within the institution, 4 (14,3 percent) agreed, 6 (21,4 percent) were not sure, 7 (25,0 percent) disagreed and 6 (21,4 percent) totally disagreed.

When entrepreneurship education options are considered (i.e. entrepreneurship infusion versus separate modules), this response should be taken into account.

9. The teaching of entrepreneurship to students not enrolled in business related studies.

The respondents were asked about their opinion regarding the responsibility of teaching entrepreneurship to students **not** enrolled in business related subjects.

The majority (17 or 60, 7 percent) totally disagreed that institutions did not have a responsibility of teaching entrepreneurship to such students, 2 (7, 1 percent) disagreed, 4 (14, 2 percent) were not sure, 2 (7, 1 percent) agreed and 1 (10, 7 percent) totally agreed. Given the theory associated with entrepreneurship education (Venter, 2012), the results auger well for academics wishing to be empowered to deliver entrepreneurship curricula (entrepreneurship infused) to all students.

It is a little disconcerting though that a number of academics are unsure or against all students receiving such education.

10 Where will graduates be employed in future?

The respondents were approached regarding their perceptions of future employment of graduates. The following options were suggested to the academics: Government, Private Sector, Self-employed and Unemployed.

The responses to the question were difficult to quantify as some respondents noted one sector and others a percentage. This was mostly as a result of a flaw in the questionnaire and not so much ambiguous responses.

However the respondents indicated that Self-employment was most favored, followed by the Private Sector, then Government. With the exception of 5 respondents (17, 9 percent), few were not too concerned with potential unemployment.

Given the status afforded entrepreneurship education, the results are satisfactory.

Graduates could be employed in various environments in Africa (Kinyanjui, 2010)

1. Differences between the Liberian labor market and other sub-Saharan countries.

There seems to be a considerable difference of opinion regarding the difference in the local (Liberian) labor market and that of other African countries.

6 Respondents (21, 4 percent) totally agreed that there were differences in the local and other labor markets, 7 (25, 0 percent) agreed, 8 (28, 6 percent) were not sure, 5 (17, 9 percent) disagreed and 2 (7, 1 percent) totally disagreed.

A variable that might have contaminated the response is the issue of foreign travel. Numerous academics apparently went into exile in other (African) countries during the civil war.

Notwithstanding the fact that there might be a lack of insight into the fundamentals of other labor markets, practitioners and institutional promoters of entrepreneurship education and development should heed the sometimes contradictory responses above. Implementing generic *African* style programmes or importing programmes from neighboring countries might not always be appropriate (see Oya, 2010).

2. Reasons for similarities/differences between the Liberian labor market and other sub-Saharan countries.

Some qualitative responses were offered for reasons why the labor market in Liberia differs or is the same than other sub-Saharan countries.

Those who agreed that differences exist:

- differences regarding demographics and culture
- ethics (lack of)
- no government control over commodities
- no capacity yet to absorb skilled labor as a result of conflict
- pricing of labor (low)
- poor government policy
- many expatriates in the market
- slow post war recovery- education in isolation from other countries
- does not cater for job needs of graduates

- high illiteracy- unskilled and casual labor dominates.

Those who disagreed that differences exist:

- all developing markets homogeneous in needs
- similar dependence on mining and agricultural sector
- social, political, cultural and economic variables similar
- high demand for vocational training
- similar skills shortages
- demand/supply similar
- same objectives such as women and as target group for unemployment.

3. Attractiveness of employment abroad.

Respondents were asked if the opportunity would arise, their graduates would prefer to work and live in another African country.

9 academics (32, 1 percent) totally agreed that graduates would prefer foreign employment, 11 (39, 3 percent) agreed, 2 (7, 1 percent) were unsure, 6 (21, 4 percent) disagreed and none totally disagreed.

The issue of loss of valuable skilled labor and professionals (the so-called *brain drain* see Nunn, 2005) to other countries is an ongoing concern for most developing countries. Making careers and entrepreneurship opportunities more attractive in post-conflict Liberia. Effective relationships between all stakeholders, private and public sector should be used to reach this objective.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

The following **conclusions** could be made:

- Younger academics and women are underrepresented as respondents.
- There is a shortage of experienced academics
- There is a good core of work experience in business environments among academics.
- The content of subjects is mostly perceived to be conducive towards the creation of self-employment.
- There seems consensus that all academics, notwithstanding the course(s) they teach, should be responsible for entrepreneurship education.

- There is no consensus if the overall responsibility for entrepreneurship education should rest in one department or unit.
- Tertiary education institutions do have a responsibility in teaching students entrepreneurship skills, even if they are not enrolled in a business-related field.
- It is perceived that future employment will mainly rest in self-employment and the private sector.
- Academics mostly feel that the demands of the Liberian labor market are generally similar to other sub-Saharan African countries. There are however some important differences.
- There exists a strong perception that students would prefer to live and work in other African countries after graduation, if possible.

The following **recommendations** are made:

- Special efforts (as in the case of most sub-Saharan countries) should be made to Recruit younger and female academia.
- The paper shows that overall Liberian academics are enthusiastic regarding entrepreneurship education and willing to participate. There should thus be no hesitation in developing and rolling out such education.
- There is an understanding that entrepreneurship education should be rolled out throughout institutions and the courses they offer. The process of *infusing* entrepreneurship into each and every curriculum is asked for.
- Although all academics would participate in entrepreneurship education, it would be advisable to have the overall responsibility and coordination role seated in one unit, possibly a Center for Entrepreneurship.
- As it is perceived that the private sector and the SMME sector would be the main suppliers of job opportunities for graduates, renewed efforts should be made to forge strong links and interaction with all role players in these sectors.
- As there seem to be some similarities between the demands of the Liberian labor market and that of other sub-Saharan countries, using previously developed curricula and study material could be valid and useful. Great care however should be taken to address the country-specific variables associated with the Liberian market, such as the legacy of an environment in conflict.

- The reality of losing valuable skills assets to Liberia as a result of emigration (*brain drain*) is a reality as is the case throughout the developing world. An integrated plan, whereby all sectors of the economy, in conjunction with universities, should be established. Initiatives such as mandatory post graduate community service could be considered.
- It is finally recommended that studies of this nature be duplicated in other African countries, with the aim of generating comparative data.

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