

“The Indispensable Role of Tertiary Education in Liberia’s Post-Conflict Development”

Address by Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

And Visitor of the University of Liberia

At the 93rd Commencement Convocation

Samuel Kanyon Doe Sports Complex

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All Protocol has been duly observed!

It is my duty, and I am pleased, as The Visitor of this state-funded institution, to attend this Commencement exercise, and join in celebrating the achievement of our nation’s brightest minds; to join our young men and women as they embark upon their journey into the world of work and careers.

As The Visitor, I congratulate you, Class of 2012, on behalf of our Government and people, for what you have accomplished so far, and what you will do for our New Liberia – a Liberia with a new long-term Vision, a Liberia with a Transformative Agenda and a Strategic Roadmap for National Healing, Peace-building and National Reconciliation.

Today, I stand before you in a second capacity, as the Commencement Speaker of the University’s 93rd Convocation, in response to the request of the President of the University, Dr. Dennis, to speak on the importance of education, particularly tertiary education.

The Role of Higher Education in National Development

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Mindful of the important role that education plays in any society, Liberia’s founding fathers made a fundamental decision to establish an institution of higher education to supply the manpower needs of our country. By an Act of the Legislature, Liberia College was founded in 1851, and a three-man faculty, that included President Joseph Jenkins Roberts, Rev. Alexander Crummell and Rev. Edward W. Blyden, were appointed to run the College.

However, it was another twelve years – February 2, 1863 – before the doors of Liberia College were opened, with the admission of seven young men who presented certificates of good moral character and passed examination in Greek, Latin and Mathematics. Through the years, Liberia College survived on the goodwill and generosity of donors from abroad. Depending on the political tempo, it either functioned well, or had to close for lack of financial support, quarrel among administration and faculty members, and indiscipline among students.

The most intractable issue for a long time, which affected the College's operation and output, was its location and mission in the socio-economic and political life of the Republic. Notwithstanding the differences, one thing which clearly stood out since its founding is the inseparable, symbiotic link between the Government of Liberia and the University of Liberia. With this relationship in mind, the Government, under our leadership, and of former leaderships, continues to fulfill its noble obligation to this institution without preconditions.

This University of Liberia in particular, and tertiary education in general, have an indispensable role to play in Liberia's national development plan. Educators agree that broad-based development and transformation rests substantially on the development of human skills and the capacity to create and adapt knowledge and technology appropriate to the needs of individual nations and local solutions.

Further, we believe that the economic development momentum and accomplishments of a nation are directly proportional to its investment in tertiary education. A nation depends heavily on the human capital produced by tertiary educational institutions for its leaders, thinkers, planners, inventors and managers.

We repose this weighty responsibility in institutions of higher learning for three reasons. First, every university is intended to produce the human capital needed for the realization of national socio-economic agenda, which must be of quality and relevant locally and internationally. Second, a university provides the space to undertake research that facilitates knowledge, improves the quality of life and enables policy makers to enrich and inform their decisions. And third, a university takes the lead in providing think-tank services for the public and private sectors of society.

Are we getting these dividends from our universities? Yes, to a certain extent. Should we be complacent with what we have? The answer is a resounding "No." We need to improve the quality of service and output to make it meaningful to our existing objective. The dearth of sufficient locally competent human capital to ensure cost-effective national transformation and prosperity has been one of the limiting factors in our reconstruction and rehabilitation.

We all know that an informed nation makes sound decisions, and that a political system thrives when its population is highly educated. The task of educating our people to make reasoned decisions, for themselves or others or both, is the mission of our educational system, especially tertiary institutions.

Government's major thrust in making higher education accessible to more people was to decentralize tertiary education. Thus, from three institutions in the entire country in 1980, the country now boasts of eleven state-owned and church-supported institutions, including community colleges and the Sinji Polytechnic, with a combined enrollment of 44,000 students – 31,000 of them in the University of Liberia system alone.

However, as I review the list of graduates, I foresee some difficulty in finding jobs for many of you graduating today. We have made our Medical, Agriculture and Teachers Colleges free, yet our young people do not enter these colleges in sufficient numbers. Today, for whatever reason, there's not a single doctor who is graduating. There is one pharmacist who is graduating in a post-conflict country

that desperately needs engineers, scientists and teachers. Today, 925 of you are coming out of Business College, compared to 146 graduating from the College of Science and Technology, 106 from Agriculture and 65 from the Teachers College.

We need a revival, we need a rethink, we need a reorientation because now more than ever before, we need graduates in the sciences to work in our petroleum and mining sectors. We need agriculturists to support our work in food security and food sovereignty. We desperately need teachers to improve the quality of education in order to produce an educated nation in keeping with our National Vision. We can only become a middle-income country if we sharply reduce the adult illiteracy rate of over 41 percent.

But I'm pleased to note what Dr. Dennis said about the changing trend when he mentioned that so many in the current enrollment had indeed shifted from some of the traditional areas to be able to go into the sciences and engineering that we need so desperately.

The University of Liberia has a leading role in sustaining the democratic culture we are building. We expect that scholars will be inspired to undertake research and develop new ideas that will enrich national policies; that new and positive ideas will be encouraged to investigate some of the problems to develop our development drive; and that they will help us to be able to promote our progress to tackle issues like corruption, the lack of a vigorous entrepreneur spirit, and of innovation.

Our belief in the transformative power of tertiary education is strong and genuine. It must be meaningful and beneficial to the holder. Indeed, it must be pursued upon sober reflection based on clear vision. Students pursuing that will provide guarantee of satisfaction and happiness both to the individual and to the state.

Rebuilding Liberia is the collective responsibility of all Liberians. We cannot expect foreign workers to provide the mechanical and technical expertise which this country needs, and which it will require even more of in the future. We must be able to fill all the gaps and the vacuum that exist in our technical and managerial capacity.

Many may recall my comments about big dreams, at a recent graduation ceremony. I said then, and I say now, if your dreams don't scare you, they are not big enough. I still believe in dreams, and the dreams of a better Liberia as was recently encapsulated in the Vision 2030. Dreams and visions are figurative, as we must plan, strategize and implement cardinal steps for a bigger and brighter future. The foundation rests on education.

Education compares only to oxygen as the catalytic point around which every facet of development hinges. We are challenged in many respects as to what kind of education, what system we must have in place, and at what levels we lay emphasis on science and technology. How do we reinforce and educate on the positive nature of our culture? How can our educational system produce our technocratic class required to run our country?

Our educational system has produced men and women of the highest caliber, which has helped to reinforce the morals and ethics that were found in the family and in the home environment. Today, we are challenged to reflect on the state of ethics and morality in our public space, and the role that education has played in this regard.

While meeting these challenges, we must not lose sight of the importance of quality education, around which every aspect of the planning of our vision for a new Liberia must evolve. There is, however, a paradox to contemplate. We want an education, but are we prepared for the sacrifice which it entails? We need an education, but at what price and against what odds must we situate our focus? We are in a hurry to account for the many years that the locusts have eaten; but we must remember that education is not an end into itself, but the means to an end.

Education, formal and general, helps to mold character and personality. The mere conferral of a degree, if not earned or deserved, becomes an antithesis of professional success. Education is the sum total of all that is taught to you, of the morals instilled in you at home, and the values to which you are exposed in the community.

It is gratifying to see the University of Liberia, the nation's *Lux in Tenebris* (light in darkness), the citadel of academia, contribute its quota to the human resource base that is required for the serious implementation of our development agenda. It is a source of appreciation when some of the best and brightest minds – many of you sitting there – will take up the mantle in both the public and private space to serve our common patrimony.

Do not see a degree as the door handle that you must press to make your presence felt. Rather, let the sum total of what education, skills and knowledge you have accumulated, and that which lies within the frame of that degree, show your true worth. Let that which you know and profess to know come out, collectively your true worth as graduates will see Liberia rise again.

To the Graduates

I applaud you, members of the Class of 2012 – all one thousand eight hundred and twenty of you – for making it to this Graduation Day. As you prepare to turn your tassels, signaling the end of this phase of your journey, I sense your excitement and eagerness to get out there and translate the knowledge you have acquired to practical use. Go out and embrace the promising future that awaits you, whether at home or abroad.

However, know that the world you are about to enter is not all rosy; it has its challenges and disappointments. Be prepared mentally, physically and morally to adapt, in order to achieve your target and objectives. Be fearless in setting your goals and pursuing them. Rest assured that your government will provide the appropriate environment in which you can realize your best dreams.

Were it not for your parents, guardians and sponsors, you, graduates, would not be here. Let us thank them on your behalf.

We say thank you to them as well. To you, proud parents and guardians of these graduates, you deserve praise and commendation for investing time and money in these young men and women, from kindergarten until today. Your guidance and your support and protection have made this day possible for all of us.

We express special appreciation to the faculty, administrators and staff of this university, for their roles in getting you here. As you graduate, say a big thank you to all of the teachers and other mentors who, along the way, made a difference in your lives.

Let me extol the efforts of the President, the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff in raising this University of Liberia to the level to attract international funding and partnerships, most recently with Tilburg University in the Netherlands, where I witnessed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that establishes mutually beneficial scientific, technological, educational and other relations, including a Master's degree scholarship scheme, a Teach the Teachers Program fostering collaborative faculty and student exchange, and an exchange of scientific and technical educational literature produced by both institutions.

Let me also commend a member of the Board of Trustees, Mr [Upjit Singh] Sachdeva, who I think is in this room – may you stand please – and who just whispered to me that the Government of India, through him, will be granting nine graduate scholarships to enable some of you that are graduating today to be able to pursue a graduate degree. They left the areas of choice open, but may I urge the university – five of those scholarships to the University of Liberia and the other four to two other universities – to choose the subjects in the areas we have mentioned. The technical areas – science, medicine and engineering; those areas that will enable us to meet our goals to have those people qualified to manage the new, emerging Liberia.

Class of 2012, congratulations for reaching this milestone. Go out and conquer the world. Go out and serve your country. Go out and be an example for all the younger ones to follow!

God bless you! Congratulations!