



Evaluating the Impact of Ebola on Tertiary Education in Sierra Leone

Yanoh Kay Jalloh, MPH and Muktarr Raschid, BS

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*"It's not a pleasant thing to recall, but I believe it's a salient lesson for us to learn" -
Papa Ray, Fourah Bay College*

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Summary Action Points and Findings

The Ebola epidemic devastated Sierra Leone from May 2014 to November 2015. It is clear that universities and related organisations had no concrete action plan for such disasters. Recovery plans often focused on primary and secondary school education. Plans for recovery should also include solutions to repair damages to teaching and learning in higher education institutions because these damages will affect the future development of the country.

Recommendations:

1. A robust emergency plan needs to be developed by all universities and colleges.
2. Distance learning programs should be encouraged in order to enable learning and information sharing to continue during and after these events.
3. An Education Crisis fund, backed by the government, should be implemented. This fund would pledge to support students affected by a health crisis e.g. when a student cannot continue education due to the loss of the major breadwinner.
4. It is imperative for mental health services to be integrated into the existing response system.

Yanoh Jalloh is an adjunct lecturer at New York Institute of Technology in the Department of Health Sciences and a visiting lecturer with Professors Without Borders in Sierra Leone. Jalloh has worked with several different organizations in Sierra Leone on girls empowerment programming, health education programming and resiliency planning for communities hit by disaster. Most recently, Jalloh serves as a strategic adviser for SUDU, an organization that aims to provide quality homes and educations to orphans in Sierra Leone. **Muktarr Raschid** is a

civil right activist and an intern with Professors Without Borders. Raschid is a founding member of the Movement for Social Progress, a grassroots Pan African movement in Sierra Leone. He holds a BA General History & Sociology and BA of Laws (Hons).

Context

Sierra Leone is a small country in West Africa that has faced many trials and tribulations, including diseases such as malaria and typhoid, which are as frequent as the common cold, and natural disasters such as the mudslide in August 2017. Between 2014 and 2016, Sierra Leoneans were also confronted with one of the country's greatest challenges to date: the Ebola virus. Sierra Leone has a very rich history, but much of its recent past is characterized by the 10-year civil war¹ that ravaged the country from 1991 to 2002. The war was caused in part by disgruntled youth who decided to take a stand against corruption and poor living conditions. After the war ended, the country took decades to rebuild.

Sierra Leone's healthcare infrastructure took an especially hard hit during the civil war. Despite over 10 NGOs² officially operating within the Ministry of Health at present, and over 317 NGOs operating in the country overall,³ outcomes are still poor. Sierra Leone's maternal mortality rate remains one of the highest in the world, with 1,360 mothers dying per every 100,000 live births. The country is also plagued by high unemployment, especially amongst youth, with an average of 80,000 youth out of a population of over 7 million actively seeking employment. The country faces a dearth of adequate medical facilities and mental health services, a life expectancy of 48, corruption and an underdeveloped infrastructure.⁴ When the Ebola virus hit Sierra Leone in 2014, the country was in no way prepared for what was to come.

¹ Friedman-Rudovsky, J. (2018). *The women who bear the scars of Sierra Leone's civil war*. [online] Telegraph.co.uk. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/sierraleone/10450619/The-women-who-bear-the-scars-of-Sierra-Leones-civil-war.html>.

²Ministry of Health and Sanitation. (2007). *Healthcare*. [online] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080217052144/http://www.health.sl/drwebsite/publish/healthcare.shtml>.

³ 2012 Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOS) Survey for National Accounts Compilation. (2013). [online] Sierra Leone: Statistics Sierra Leone. Available at: https://www.statistics.sl/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NGO_survey_report_2012.pdf.

⁴The World Bank In Sierra Leone. (2018). *Sierra Leone Overview*. [online] Available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sierraleone/overview>.

Figures on Ebola

Between 2014 and 2016, over 14,000⁵ individuals in Sierra Leone were infected with Ebola, with over 4,000⁶ individuals dying as a result of the disease, equivalent to a 28.5% death rate. We have no estimate of how many of these were students, faculty or university staff. This figure is believed to be grossly underreported⁷ as many people hid the deaths of family members so that they would be able to perform the traditional burial rites. The disease spread from neighboring Guinea and affected people in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia and Mali. On 17 March 2016, the World Health Organization declared that Sierra Leone was Ebola-free. The epidemic had lasted nearly two years.

Methodology and Significance

From September to December of 2017, researchers with Professors Without Borders (PROWIBO) embarked on a project to understand the impact of the Ebola outbreak on tertiary institutions. We interviewed students and faculty members from Fourah Bay College (FBC), Milton Margai College, and the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) in Freetown, Sierra Leone, conducted a thorough evaluation of the existing literature and drew from researchers' experiences in the country. Administrators at these institutions refused to meet with us.

This research project contributes to an understanding of the impact of epidemics on the socio-economic development of a country. Tertiary education produces the future academic and business elite of a nation; interruption of studies affects the economic prospects and mental health of students, which in turn can influence marital and familial prospects in the short term. As a result, any report that investigates the impact of epidemics cannot afford to dismiss the importance of educational continuity, including continuity at the university level.

This study on the impact of Ebola on higher education in Sierra Leone can serve as a template for better assessing the extent to which health disasters affect development. This can

⁵ CDC.gov. (2016). Ebola Outbreak in West Africa - Case Counts | Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever | CDC. [online] Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/case-counts.html>.

⁶ BBC News. (2015). *Ebola 'devastating' Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-32359284/ebola-outbreak-devastating-effect-on-sierra-leone>.

⁷ Ibid.

also help the health community develop best practices for future emergencies by focusing on minimizing the disruption to students and faculty members.

The State of Higher Education in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has approximately 17 institutions of higher education,⁸ with a considerable number of these located in the capital, Freetown. For the purpose of this research, we define institutes of higher education as four-year, degree-granting programs. Sierra Leone was once revered for its academic institution Fourah Bay College (FBC), the oldest university in West Africa and the first western-style university built in the region. Fourah Bay College was commonly known as, “The Athens of West Africa.” This was because many eager students from neighboring countries came to study here, seeking an education that they hoped would help them pursue their professional dreams. Unfortunately, its heyday was short-lived. Since the latter part of the 20th century, FBC, like many other institutions of higher education in the country, has not lived up to expectations. The economic crisis of the 1980s⁹ is partly to blame since subsidies and funding for the university have been severely cut. These days, lecture halls are filled beyond capacity with students sometimes having to stand in the back of the lecture halls. Often students do not have access to basic resources such as printer paper.¹⁰

According to a USAID International Data and Economic Analysis (IDEA) query, 5% of 15- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in some sort of tertiary education in 2014 (IDEA also indicates that in 2014, there were just over a million 15- to 24-year-olds living in Sierra Leone). Our investigation shows that 2,691 students were admitted to the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) for the 2016–2017 academic year. The cost of FBC averages anywhere from \$714 to \$2,185 per annum depending on the courses selected. Thus, generally only the privileged elite, those financially well off and those with family members living abroad who are able and willing to sponsor their education have access to tertiary-level education in Sierra

⁸ Tecsl.info. (2018). *Tertiary Education Commission Sierra Leone | Tertiary Education Commission Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <http://tecsl.info/>.

⁹ The Economist. (2016). *The trials of running universities in Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21696673-sierra-leones-university-system-collapsing-trials-running-universities>.

¹⁰ Sierra Leone News. (2015). *Tears of Fourah Bay College – the University of Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <http://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/tears-of-fourah-bay-college-the-university-of-sierra-leone/>.

Leone. With more than 60% of the population living on \$1.25 a day,¹¹ higher education is often unattainable.

Ebola's Impact on Education

As Ebola ravaged the country, public gatherings were banned,¹² including lectures at all universities. Education was abruptly halted for thousands of students across the nation. We know that the education of about 1.7 million school-age children was interrupted,¹³ but limited data are available regarding those at tertiary-level institutions, as most studies have focused on elementary and secondary schooling. With the enrollment of university students aged 15–24 across the country at just over 64,000 when the Ebola outbreak peaked, we know that all of these students had their schooling disrupted for at least nine months. In any case, at least students of primary and secondary school received *some* form of education during the Ebola outbreak. Unlike college and university students, younger students with access could benefit from televised and radio-broadcast lessons¹⁴ which were developed by the Ministry of Education. These programs targeted all students regardless of their grade, age, or learning level; students in rural areas or without access to a radio could not benefit from these programs.

While these radio and TV education initiatives were commendable, they lacked the hands-on learning and two-way learning mechanism through which most students thrive. Janice Williams, former InLabs Program Director at Global Minimum (Gmin), was in Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak. Williams' work with Gmin focused on engaging students through a two-way learning format. Gmin launched the Hack at Home initiative,¹⁵ which enabled teachers to connect with students via WhatsApp and Facebook. It challenged students to use their critical thinking skills to come up with solutions to issues such as the Ebola epidemic, which was occurring at the time. By the end of the Hack at Home initiative, the organizers had reached over 900 students in 12 of Sierra Leone's 14 districts. We mention this initiative to not only commend these types of initiatives, but also to shed light on the disparity in terms of support given to

¹¹ UNDP in Sierra Leone. (2015). *About Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <http://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

¹² Medium. (2016). *Re-imagining higher education in Sierra Leone – Jon Harle – Medium*. [online] Available at: <https://medium.com/@jonharle/re-imagining-higher-education-in-sierra-leone-f109c2331d94>.

¹³ World Vision. (2015). *Impact of Ebola on education in Sierra Leone | World Vision*. [online] World Vision. Available at: <https://www.worldvision.org/health-news-stories/impact-of-ebola-on-education-sierra-leone>.

¹⁴ Ibid 13.

¹⁵ Gmin.org. (2014). *Learning is a Two-Way Street: Innovate Salone's "Hack at Home" Initiative*. [online] Available at: <http://gmin.org/learning-is-a-two-way-street-innovate-salones-hack-at-home-initiative/>.

tertiary-level institutions and the availability of technology to mitigate academic interruptions at all levels.

Colleges and universities were closed for more than nine months¹⁶ When they finally opened, programs were condensed, with classes meeting on weekends and for extended hours during the week. Many students interviewed expressed concern about the quality of their education within these accelerated programs. According to several students, no accommodations were made to account for the lengthy period of time that school had not been in session. Though some reports say that printed and electronic copies of lectures were made available to students, we are not sure what percentage of the students were aware of these and had access to them as these were not mentioned by any of our interviewees. Nevertheless, even with these electronic lectures, three students we interviewed indicated that their graduation date had been delayed. FBC's graduation ceremony traditionally takes place in December; however, even prior to the Ebola outbreak, for a reason which remains unknown, the university administration had not been able to meet this deadline. The December graduation ceremony for the class of 2014 occurred in May of 2015, approximately five months later than scheduled. We do not have data for other institutions. However, based on the situation at FBC, we can assume graduations were delayed by at least five months and possibly up to nine months. The outbreak also impacted graduate level studies; for instance, the Sierra Leone Law School, did not admit students for an entire year. There is now a backlog of students who have graduated, but need to wait a year before they begin matriculation. A student we interviewed described their frustration with their delay in attending law school:

Ebola really had an impact on all business life, not least our academic journey. That is why, now that we're in the final year and we've nearly finished the course, we are going to wait for another year to actually go to law school. Something I should have spent five years on, I'm now going to spend six years on because there is a one-year gap.

When we asked students when they thought the university would most likely return to a normal schedule, the responses were not promising:

It will take some time, because looking at the start of the academic year—mid-March. It is very difficult for it to go in normal time. Now, the academic year is haphazard, it's now March to July. Normally, we close the college on August but now it will extend up to

¹⁶ Ebola outbreak in West Africa 23 months on: Sierra Leone university students' views on the crisis. (2015). ACAPS Primary Data Collection report: November 2015. ACAPS. Available at: <http://www.washlearningsl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/r-acaps-report-students-views-on-ebola-crisis-november-2015-1.pdf>.

October. And you expect the re-opening of the college to be in October, but if students (sic) shut down on October, you must expect the students to rest before coming back.

When schools reopened, many students had to scramble in order to obtain their school fees;¹⁷ because of Ebola, many students had lost the person who was financially responsible for their education. Shortly after classes resumed at FBC, thousands of students were forced out of class due to non-payment of school fees. In Abdullah and Rashid's "Understanding West Africa's Ebola Epidemic: Towards a Political Economy," the authors describe the economic impact Ebola had on the youth.¹⁸ Many young girls resorted to "sugar daddies" as their parents were not able to financially support them. There have also been reports that the rate of teenage pregnancy has increased since the Ebola outbreak.¹⁹ With many university students still in their teenage years, it is fair to assume that this may be also be true for some of them. Many young men had to resort to driving passengers on *okadas*, taxi motorcycles, as a source of income, though these have been banned in downtown Freetown because of the danger associated with riding them. Abdullah and Rashid also describe a reversal of responsibilities, with young women and men now taking care not only of themselves but of their families (including parents, siblings, extended relatives, spouses, and children). A number of businesses and operations closed during the Ebola outbreak, therefore many parents, guardians and native sponsors lost their incomes. Many students had to support their families, loosening their proximity to a future, university-educated life.

The Ebola outbreak also impacted those Sierra Leonean university students who had intended to study abroad. Although it is not clear exactly how many experienced this, there were cases where Sierra Leonean students were refused entry at colleges²⁰ outside the country because of the outbreak.

Papa Ray, a lecturer at Fourah Bay College whom we interviewed for this project, indicated that during the outbreak, he delivered lectures for as long as possible. As a drama professor, much of his work had to be done in person. Papa Ray described meeting students in

¹⁷ The trials of running universities in Sierra Leone. (2016). *The Economist*. [online] Available at: <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21696673-sierra-leones-university-system-collapsing-trials-running-universities>.

¹⁸ Sorie, A. (2016). *Thousands Of Fourah Bay College Students Sent Out Of Class*. [online] Sierraloadead. Available at: <http://sierraloadead.net/thousands-of-fourah-bay-college-students-sent-out-of-class/>.

¹⁹ OpenDemocracy. (2015). *Losing girls: post Ebola in Sierra Leone*. [online] Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/yanoh-kay-jalloh/losing-girls-post-ebola-in-sierra-leone>.

²⁰ WENR. (2015). *Post-Ebola Challenges for Education in West Africa - WENR*. [online] Available at: <https://wenr.wes.org/2015/09/post-ebola-challenges-education-west-africa>.

the amphitheater to rehearse when they requested. Papa Ray said that the outbreak of the virus was extremely destructive and that the university had not been prepared to deal with it, though admitted that no one was. Papa Ray was also very appreciative of the fact that the faculty still received their salaries during the entire time that the university was closed.

I don't know whether to blame them or to congratulate them because I would say nationally, we were not fully prepared for the Ebola attack because our health system had been broken down to a large extent. So for a university that was largely dependent on government and had such a token of a hospital, you would not blame them too much. But I think, in terms of information, they passed that around and people were warned to avoid physical contact. Those are the basic things they did. And yet still, we were never without our salaries.

Papa Ray also explained that FBC has yet to return to a normal academic schedule. By all accounts, it is not clear when the normal academic schedule will resume. Lecturer Samba of Milton Margai College indicated being pleased that the university has been able to resume its normal academic schedule; this was accomplished in part by changing the calendar format. Milton Margai was previously on a trimester schedule, but by converting to a semester format, in combination with “catch up” classes, it has been able to resume its normal schedule.

Njala University attempted to create a blended-teaching model²¹ whereby students would be able to access course resources and complete assignments online. However, without financial backing, this was a difficult goal to achieve. It seems that since the Ebola epidemic ended, Njala University has resumed its attempts, but there is much work yet to be done.

Professors were also impacted by the outbreak and some lecturers and professors died during this time.²² This had a sort of domino effect on the workforce, as there were fewer qualified lecturers and professors to conduct courses when the universities reopened. Papa Ray recalls:

It destabilized work across the board, not just locally but nationally it destabilized work. Some of the students kept away. Some we lost. We could not even tell how many students we lost. We even lost lecturer colleagues. It's not a pleasant thing to recall but I believe it's a salient lesson for us to learn...

²¹ Ibid 12.

²² University World News. (2016). *Profound impacts of Ebola on higher education linger - University World News*. [online] Available at: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20160807180014193>.

In addition to the impact that the Ebola outbreak had on tertiary institutions, students noted the emotional impact that the outbreak had on them and on their family and friends. Many students revealed that due to the ban on public gatherings, they felt lonely. Shultz,²³ Baingana, and Neria concluded that depression and anxiety are to be expected in post-Ebola Sierra Leone.

Risk factors for students, and for the population at large, stem from being exposed to trauma. This trauma includes witnessing or caring for victims of the virus, fearing infection and mourning for relatives and friends who had passed away, as well as suffering the effects of discrimination and stigmatization. Though none of our interviewees mentioned this, many people turned to alcohol²⁴ as a means of coping with the stress surrounding the outbreak. Our immediate experience allows us to assume that students of tertiary-level institutions also experienced these symptoms, and may still be at risk for mental illness. With only one trained psychiatrist in the entire country²⁵ we do not believe students or staff who were experiencing symptoms of mental illness were able to receive adequate support or treatment. How this lack of mental health support has impacted their education and employment remains unclear.

Of the students we interviewed, none indicated that they had any type of support, be it academic, psychological, or physical, during the time their respective institution was closed due to the Ebola outbreak. One student describes the distress they experienced due to the death of their classmates:

There were a lot of students who were affected directly during the Ebola process. Some are dead, some are seriously sick now because of the Ebola crisis. Honestly, they never returned.

Idriss, a final-year student at Milton Margai College, indicated that they were able to stay on campus in their dorm room throughout the closure of the college. One could call this a type of social service support, as Idriss himself admitted that they had nowhere else to go since their home was quarantined. Idriss described feeling traumatized both during and after the outbreak. Much of their trauma is associated with the death of several distant relatives dying from the virus. Some of their trauma, however, is due to the stress and pressure of their academic studies. Idriss knew that the university closure would delay their graduation. After the university

²³ Ibid 22.

²⁴ The Guardian (2015). Ebola takes mental health toll where 'life has frozen' in Sierra Leone. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jan/12/ebola-mental-health-sierra-leone-depression>.

²⁵ VOA. (2017). *Sierra Leone Grapples with Mental Health Impact of Ebola*. [online] Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/sierra-leone-grapples-mental-health-impact-ebola/3801212.html>.

reopened, their stress lingered due to the pressure they felt with trying to keep up with coursework with the new condensed academic calendar. Idriss described attending classes on non-traditional days just to catch up.

It's really challenging. Really, really challenging. Not easy. Even Saturday classes, you'll attend Saturday classes, Sunday classes. Sometimes lecturers call you on Sundays, even on holidays, to attend classes, for them to make up for the lost time.

Despite the negative impact on tertiary-level institutions, students noted that there were some positive outcomes:²⁶ namely, improved hygiene amongst Sierra Leonean citizens. Students also reported being pleased with how Sierra Leoneans worked together²⁷ and mobilized during the outbreak, with everyone doing their part in fighting the outbreak.

The Way Forward

The Ebola epidemic was a blow to the entire country, with its dilapidated health care system and no emergency plan for a high magnitude epidemic. Papa Ray describes how the Ebola outbreak left a psychological scar on the country:

The damage done by people (people not infected with Ebola) to them (Ebola infected people), during those Ebola days has left a kind of psychological scar and some have not recovered. You find out that some people have become, what do they call it, some kind of hermit. They are in the community, but because of the way they were treated by people with whom they used to interact but were shunned by during the Ebola, they are completely different.

Obviously, the government, the Ministry of Health and the international community must work together to figure out how to combat such an outbreak in the future whilst providing the least amount of disruption to everyday life. We must not only hope that lessons have been learned. Action steps must be taken to ensure that lessons are not learned twice.

But what role do tertiary institutions play in action plans? While we do not have much information on student healthcare at the colleges and universities of Sierra Leone, there is no doubt that it is imperative for mental health services to be integrated into the existing university healthcare system. It is clear that emotional trauma will impact students during national disasters,

²⁶ Ibid 16.

²⁷ Ibid 16.

and if the mental health needs of students and staff are not addressed early on, this could ultimately lead to more dire consequences. This is especially critical for students and staff who have lost close family members and for members of the college and university community who are Ebola survivors. Left untreated, these types of symptoms have the potential to lead to severe, long-lasting mental health problems or even suicide.²⁸

A robust emergency plan needs to be developed by all the universities and colleges in the country. This plan could be used not only for outbreaks of diseases like Ebola but also for natural disasters such as the recent mudslide²⁹ and periods of instability and political unrest. These emergency plans should include guidelines for students to follow, emergency operating procedures, clear operating procedures specifying when classes will be cancelled and an estimate of when they will resume and any relevant resources for students. University administrators should use lessons from Ebola and develop several modified academic schedules in the event of university closure, although hopefully, with the inclusion of some of the above recommendations, implementation of such a schedule would be a rare occurrence.

Furthermore, some type of distance learning program should be developed for each course using an online portal such as Blackboard, which could be used in tandem with lectures throughout the school year even outside the context of an emergency. A partnership with online education portals such as edX³⁰ and Coursera³¹ would be an innovative and useful way to continue to keep students engaged and would allow them to gain credit for their efforts. Responsibility for setting up such a learning management system should ultimately lie with each university, although we understand the infrastructure and resources may be inaccessible in some cases.

In the meantime, professors and lecturers could be trained to provide some sort of course materials and updates via portals such as WhatsApp and Facebook, similar to Global Minimum's Hack at Home initiative. However, although approximately 83% of Sierra Leoneans have access

²⁸ Depressive symptoms among survivors of Ebola virus disease in Conakry (Guinea): preliminary results of the PostEboGui cohort. (2017). *BMC Psychiatry*, [online] 17(127). Available at: [http://Depressive symptoms among survivors of Ebola virus disease in Conakry \(Guinea\): preliminary results of the PostEboGui cohort](http://Depressive symptoms among survivors of Ebola virus disease in Conakry (Guinea): preliminary results of the PostEboGui cohort).

²⁹ Aljazeera.com. (2017). *Sierra Leone mudslide: What, where and why?*. [online] Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/sierra-leone-mudslide-170816053741558.html>.

³⁰ Available at: <https://www.edx.org/>

³¹ Available at: <https://www.coursera.org/>

to mobile phones,³² only about 13% of mobile phone users currently use messenger services, making the use of the Hack at Home model potentially problematic. Inclusion of student body leadership in disseminating information might also be helpful. During PROWIBO's summer school, lecturers found that student body leaders were even more influential than the university administration. Organizations like PROWIBO can play a supportive role by providing resources and a platform, such as an online forum or website, where information can be exchanged between students and faculty.

Finally, tuition assistance, payment plans, or subsidies would be ideal to assist students that may have lost or not have a source of tuition funding. Although the government of Sierra Leone made a pledge some two years ago that they would provide scholarships,³³ no information is available to indicate whether they have made good on this promise. Drawing from first hand observation, co-author Muktarr Raschid notes that recent graduates have also always found it difficult to find decent paying jobs after graduation. Before the Ebola crisis, it was common for new graduates to spend two years looking for employment before securing a position. Ebola only exacerbated this situation, as many organizations and companies began functioning on a limited basis, lessening the need to hire new employees. Furthermore, many parents, guardians, and caregivers lost their source of income or were made redundant, creating significant financial hardship. This left many students unable to pay for tuition and related costs.

Ebola clearly devastated the social, economic, and cultural lives of the citizens of Sierra Leone. Sending shockwaves of fear and hysteria throughout the country, it was something no one was prepared for. We can not only hope that the universities, the Ministry of Health, the entire country, and the world at large have learned valuable lessons from the tragedy. Action plans must be put into place with adequate attention paid to higher education. In this case, Sierra Leone will continue to push lessons forward and develop its institutional structures.

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³² Communication in Sierra Leone: An Analysis of Media and mobile audiences. (2016). BBC Media Action: Research and Learning. [online] BBC Media Action. Available at: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/rmhttp/mediaaction/pdf/research/mobile-media-landscape-sierra-leone-report.pdf>.

³³ Ibid 22.

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