

# PROFESSORS WITHOUT BORDERS



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A new study on the impact of the Ebola outbreak on higher education institutions in Sierra Leone shows that impacts went wider than immediate needs. The study found that,

- Students lost at least nine months of studies
- There was an overall absence of basic mental health support systems to help them deal with this.
- The socio-economic/development impact of closing universities for nearly a year is a massive setback to longer term development.
- New digital technologies can help reduce the economic impacts on Sierra Leone and its students.

The new study shows universities and related organisations in Sierra Leone had no concrete action plan for devastating events such as Ebola. When the Ebola outbreak peaked, researchers found that all of the country's 64,000 university students had their schooling disrupted for at least nine months. Condensed academic schedules and delayed graduation dates have yet to be normalised in many institutions. The report recommends developing distance learning programs and improving mental health and crisis planning, including financial planning to help cope with disruptions caused by such epidemics.

From September to December 2017, researchers interviewed students and faculty members from Fourah Bay College (FBC), Milton Margai College, and the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM) – 3 of the country's 17 higher education institutions. One law student interviewed noted the personal effects of this delay: *“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.”*

Many businesses and operations closed during the Ebola outbreak, resulting in students having to pull out of school because relatives who paid for their tuition had died, or could not go to work, resulting in lost earnings. The report recommends developing a government-backed financial plan that 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.”

Findings also show mental health support was either non-existent or unintegrated into higher education healthcare services, so students experiencing trauma and other mental health symptoms were unable to receive much-needed support during and after the disaster. The authors note that 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.”*

This study can serve as a template for better assessing the extent to which health disasters affect development. The international development sector could extrapolate from these recommendations and data to learn lessons for countries with similar lack of infrastructure enduring times of national crisis.

This report calls upon university administrators and the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone to act on the above recommendations, which could be enabled by new teaching technology, as the ongoing welfare of students of higher education directly impact the overall development and economy of Sierra Leone.

**Report available at**

<http://thinktank.prowibo.com/2018/04/26/evaluating-the-impact-of-ebola-on-tertiary-education-in-sierra-leone/>

**Notes to Editors**

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**Mucktarr Raschid** is a civil rights 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).

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