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POLICY ON ADMISSION

1.0 Introduction

The increase in the number of tertiary institutions in the country (both public and private), and the corresponding increase in the number of candidates who want to access the programmes offered in these institutions have profound implications for quality control in the higher education sub-sector in the country. It is highly likely that the quality of candidates admitted into these competing programmes would determine, to a considerable extent, the quality of graduates produced by these tertiary institutions and by extension the quality of the workforce.

Currently, there are no national minimum admission guidelines that are binding on tertiary institutions in Sierra Leone. Individual institutions develop and administer their own admission criteria, which are endorsed and monitored by their internal mechanisms (e.g. Senate in the case of universities and Councils in the case of other tertiary institutions). Consequently therefore, there are grave doubts about the parity and integrity of these disparate processes across institutions. Concerns have been raised about the possibility of candidates not meeting the minimum requirements being admitted into some tertiary education programmes. This is especially so as local evidence of malpractice in the existing qualifying examinations (e.g. WAEC) abounds.

The current Covid-19 pandemic, and the “new normal” condition it has imposed on all facets of life globally demands a rethink of how entire systems (including education) work. Therefore, the need for a more robust entry regime devoid of corrupt practices into programmes/courses mounted by the TEIs to address these issues cannot be over emphasized.

The Tertiary Education Commission has the responsibility of setting the standards of operation (including admission criteria) for all TEIs in the country. As enshrined in Statutory Instrument No. 2 of 2006 Section 5(1)(a): “The Commission shall set out in respect of each tertiary education institution the following standards:-

- (a) The minimum **entry requirements** for admission to any certificates, diploma or degree programmes being offered or intended to be offered;
- (b) The minimum number and duration of programmes at certificate, diploma or degree level that ought to be offered.”

2.0 Background and Rationale for an Admission Policy for Tertiary Institutions in Sierra Leone

2.1 Current Admission Policies and Practices in Sierra Leone

Currently, TEIs in Sierra Leone set their own admission criteria independently, and do not base these on any national standard. For most of these institutions, performance at the West African

Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) or its equivalent, the General Certificate of Education, ordinary Level (GCE Level) is used as the baseline for admission.

For entry into degree programmes, most institutions require a minimum of 5 credits in WASSCE/GCE in not more than two sittings. These should include a grade of 6 or better in English Language and, in some cases, a credit in Mathematics and some Science subjects for those opting for Science-based programmes.

For enrollment into Diploma and HTC programmes, a minimum of 4 credits in WASSCE or its equivalent is required, while applicants into Certificate programmes must possess at least 3 credits at WASSCE or its equivalent.

In addition to these general entry requirements, some institutions also ask for subject-specific (or Departmental/Faculty) requirements depending on the programme applied for. Entry into some programmes of study may require applicants to meet additional non-academic conditions (e.g. some prior work experience). These conditions usually apply to programmes that have professional requirements.

Interviews, auditions and practicals, as appropriate, are utilized by some institutions as additional 'selection-based' means of matriculation. Where this is the case, they may interview/audition all candidates whose applications meet their academic criteria, or they may interview only a proportion of candidates, for example where applicants are presenting non-standard qualifications, or where the applicant is a "mature candidate".

The underlining assumption here is that without a harmonized matriculation framework, there are discrepancies in admission requirements among Tertiary Education Institutions, some of which have profound implications for the quality of applicants granted admission.

2.2 Admission Practices Elsewhere in Africa

There have been vibrant efforts among African countries to regulate admission into tertiary institutions in a bid to ensure accessibility and equity, while also safeguarding the quality and integrity of the admission processes. Oanda (2020)¹ has provided a good analysis of these efforts. According to him, admissions policies to higher education institutions in West Africa "are shaped by a combination of: (a) regional policies drawn by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through the ECOWAS Education Protocol (Economic Community of West African States, 2003); (b) the influence of francophone and anglophone models in the region; and (c) national regulatory frameworks" (p.130). The ECOWAS protocol has, among other things, emphasised the need to harmonise and standardise admissions requirements for institutions of higher learning and vocational training institutions; as well as to recognize certificates and other qualifications (ECOWAS, 2003)².

¹ Ounda, I. (2020). Admission policies and practices and the reshaping of access patterns to higher education in Africa. In M.T. Oliveri & C. Wendler (2020). *Higher Education Admissions Practices: An International Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 123-144 (Downloaded from <https://www.cambridge.org/core>. Brandeis Library, on 04 Jun 2020 at 23:26:07, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms>. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108559607>

² Economic Community of West African States (2003). ECOWAS Protocol A/P/2/2/22 on education and training. ECOWAS, Department of Education, Culture, Science and Technology. Retrieved from www.esc.comm.ecowas.int/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/protocol-on-education-and-training.pdf.

Nigeria presents an excellent example in the sub-region of how a standardised admission process operates. Admissions into tertiary institutions in the country are regulated by the federal government, through the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). In practice, the policies are developed by the NUC and JAMB, and it is the two bodies that oversee admissions policies for federal and state universities. Every year, the examination conducted by the JAMB determines candidates' admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions. Established by the Federal Military Government on 13th February 1978, JAMB has the responsibility of conducting examinations to determine eligibility for admission into universities, polytechnics, colleges of education and all other tertiary level institutions. The following are the powers of the Board:

“(a) conduct Matriculation Examination for entry into all Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education (by whatever name called) in Nigeria;

(b) appoint Examiners, Moderators, Invigilators, members of the Subject Panels and committees and other persons with respect to matriculation examinations and any other matters incidental thereto or connected therewith;

(c) place suitably qualified candidates in the tertiary institutions after having taken into account:

- (i) the vacancies available in each tertiary institution;
- (ii) the guidelines approved for each tertiary institution by its proprietors or other competent authorities;
- (iii) the preference expressed or otherwise indicated by the candidates for certain tertiary institutions and courses;
- (iv) such other matters as the Board may be directed by the Honorable Minister to consider or the Board itself may consider appropriate in the circumstances.

(d) collate and disseminate information on all matters relating to admissions into tertiary institutions or any other matter relevant to the discharge of the functions of the board.

(e) carry out other activities as are necessary or expedient for the full discharge of all or any of the functions conferred on it under or pursuant to this Decree” (Federal Government of Nigeria, Decree No. 33 of 1989).

A condition for taking the JAMB examination is that candidates must have obtained the minimum number of credits in the West African Senior Secondary Certificate (WASSCE) examination conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). Eligibility to apply to a university, polytechnic or college depends on obtaining a specified cutoff score, which is periodically determined.

In Ghana, the National Commission for Tertiary Education and the National Accreditation Board have developed admissions policies for all tertiary institutions. When students submit individual applications for admissions to universities, for example, qualification for admissions is based on a student passing with six credits on the WAEC examinations.

Education ministries in East Africa, generally, have overall responsibility for defining guidelines regarding the nature and goals of higher education admissions policies. However, autonomous bodies, usually under the supervision of higher education regulatory councils, undertake the

actual design and operationalization of the policies. The Uganda Department of Higher Education in the Ministry of Education and Sports, for example, has the overall responsibility for designing admissions policies for all tertiary institutions in Uganda. “The functions of the Department include to undertake, through the Joint Admissions Board (JAB): (a) the admission of students to tertiary institutions; (b) the formulation of policies on admissions to institutions; (c) the execution of policies, procedures, and regulations pertaining to scholarships and admissions to higher education institutions; and (d) the coordination of services for the relevant organizations” (Oande, 2020). The Uganda National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) provides the overall governance framework for university education, including guidelines for admissions to all higher education institutions.

The Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU), as provided for in The Universities Act (Republic of Tanzania, 2004), has developed a centralized admissions system for admitting students to public and private higher education institutions. Among other things, the Admissions Procedures of the Act spell out the criteria and qualifications for admission to institutions and academic programmes, procedures to advance the goals of equitable access, and provisions to ensure good governance and transparency in admissions processes.

The Commission for University Education (CUE) of Kenya has the responsibility for developing admissions policies for both public and private universities, as empowered by the Universities Act No. 42 of 2012. Hitherto, the Commission for Higher Education developed admissions policies and placement to the institutions overseen by a Joint Admissions Board comprising vice-chancellors for public universities. The 2012 Act vested the responsibility of developing policies and requirements for admissions to universities with the Commission for University Education.

3.0 Underlying Principles of the Policy

1. There is widespread disenchantment with, and lack of confidence in, candidates’ performance in the WASSCE as the basis of admission into tertiary institutions, because the administration and conduct of the examination has, for several decades, been defined and characterized by numerous flaws, particularly candidates accessing the questions before the examinations. Examination malpractices have been so perennial and taken for granted that candidates at some centres that were denied “their right” to spy in the 2019 WASSE examinations resorted to riotous demonstration to reclaim “their right”. This has generated a compelling need, especially among tertiary institutions and educationists, to search for an additional layer of admission requirements for tertiary institutions based on an examination that commands greater trust and confidence, and whose results truly reflect the competence of the candidates. ***This position is strongly supported by empirical data collected as part of the policy development process.***
2. The foundation stone of the credibility and image of any higher education institution is the fairness and integrity of the admission system; that system should, as best as possible, be beyond reproach and safeguarded by quality assurance mechanisms that guarantee equal opportunity across the board. A common admissions mechanism for tertiary institutions will ensure parity of standards and correspondingly lay the foundation for parity of quality of products from tertiary institutions.
3. Where such parity of standards exist in an education system, especially at the tertiary level, it would make it easier for students to transfer to other institutions with credits earned in their previous institutions.

4.0 Vision, Aims and Objectives of the Policy

4.1 Vision

A tertiary education system to which applicants for admission are assessed through credible and trustworthy matriculation examinations and admission processes that are harmonised and governed by the highest level of fairness and integrity.

4.2 Aim

The aim of this policy is to provide the framework for the establishment of a national body responsible for the administration and conduct of examinations that determine admission to higher education institutions in Sierra Leone in conformity with the highest standards of probity, efficiency and good practices.

4.3 Objectives

The objectives of the policy are to:

1. Design a standardized minimum admissions requirement and procedure for all tertiary institutions.
2. Create a National Matriculation Examinations Board (NMEB) for the administration and conduct of matriculation examinations for admission to tertiary education institutions in Sierra Leone
3. Provide the operational rules and regulations of the NMEB that ensure integrity and probity.
4. Provide a framework for course content equivalencies, harmonization of qualifications and credit transfers among programmes and courses in various tertiary institutions.

5.0 The Policy

1. There shall be established a standardized minimum admissions requirement and procedure framework for all tertiary education institutions.
2. A National Matriculation Examinations Board shall be created for the purpose of administering and conducting examinations on the basis of which applicants for admission into all tertiary institutions shall be assessed.
3. The functions, operational rules and regulations of the NMEB shall be clearly defined and guided by the highest principles of probity, fairness, integrity, transparency and accountability
4. Programmes and contents of courses shall be synchronised to ensure parity of standard and serve as the basis of transfer of credits among tertiary institutions.

6.0 Assumptions

1. Existence of a strong political will and commitment, indicated by policy and legislative instruments, for establishing the proposed National Matriculation Examination Board (NMEB).
2. Availability of adequate, reliable and sustained financial support for effective operation of the envisaged matriculation examination system.

3. Institutional and organizational cooperation/participation among key stakeholders to ensure that the objectives and policies of the new examining body and admissions regime are faithfully implemented.
4. A furthered strengthened, non-political and independent TEC to implement the policy, with strong provisions for fairness, accountability and transparency in all its operations.
5. The general public and tertiary institutions are adequately educated on, and accept the rationale, objectives, operational strategies, advantages and benefits of the new matriculation examination system.

7.0 Legal and Regulatory Framework of the Policy

The legal and regulatory framework of the policy derives from the Tertiary Education Commission Act, 2001 and the accompanying Statutory Instrument of 2008, both of which spell out the functions of the Commission relating to admissions, standard of content of programme and quality of products of tertiary institutions. 7 (1) of the functions of the Commission states in part “to advice government on tertiary education” and “to ensure parity of the products of tertiary education institutions”. 7 (2) (h) states “ensure fair play in the admission of students...” The Statutory Instrument in 5 (1) (a) mandates the TEC to set out in respect of each tertiary education institution “the minimum entry requirements for admission to any certificate, diploma or degree programmes being offered or intended to be offered”; in 5 (1) (d) “the minimum number and duration of programmes at the certificate, diploma or degree level that ought to be offered”; and in 5 (1) (d) determine “the standards of proficiency assessed in terms of content and contact hours which students are expected to attain in respect of a certificate, diploma or degree programme”.

Thus, setting up an examining body with inherent mechanism for promoting, safeguarding and maintaining trust and quality, and corrupt-free national admissions criteria and procedure for tertiary institutions are within the statutory responsibility of the TEC.

8.0 Implementation Mechanism

1. Establishment of a National Matriculation Examination Board (NMEB) comprising
 - i. MTHE
 - ii. MBSSE
 - iii. TEC
 - iv. Representatives of universities, teacher education institutions, TechVoc institutions, NCTVA, and;
 - v. Representatives of the Conference of Principals of Secondary Schools.
2. The NMEB shall be headed by a person of high academic standing and integrity.

9.0 Framework for Harmonization and Credit Transfer of Courses

This would require the establishment of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that would specify the minimum course requirements for programmes offered by TEIs.

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. The Policy should be owned by all the key stakeholders whose responsibility it will be to ensure compliance with its provisions.
2. Clear processes to be detailed
3. Consider the possibility for life-long learning (Admission by selection/eligibility)
Recurrent budgeting by Government for its sustained operation or through a structure of self-financing through fees levied for its services.