



**REMARKS BY HIS EXCELLENCY, DR. JULIUS MAADA
BIO, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA
LEONE AND VISITOR TO THE UNIVERSITY OF
SIERRA LEONE AT THE CONGREGATION FOR THE
CONFERMENT OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS, HONORIS
CAUSA. AMPHITHEATRE, FOURAH BAY COLLEGE
-FRIDAY, 14TH APRIL 2023**

The Role of the University of Sierra Leone in Increasing Access to Higher Education

Madam First Lady,
Ministers of Government,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps
The Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone,
Members of the University Court,
The Vice Chancellor and Principal, University of Sierra Leone
Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors present,
The Registrar, University of Sierra Leone,
Academic and Administrative Staff of the University of Sierra Leone,
Parents and Guardians of Graduands,
Graduands,
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I am delighted to congratulate and grateful to share the joys of the outstanding achievements of all graduands, parents and guardians of graduands, faculty and staff of the University of Sierra Leone, and all well-wishers present. Hearty felicitations to each one of you for the roles each of you has played in making this great day possible for the graduands.

2. For each of you, I believe, you have trailled over your uncertainties, surmounted your fears, coped with challenges, persevered through tough moments, and today, you have seen through your dreams. It is no mean feat and I celebrate your successes with you with great joy.

3. I celebrate with the honorary awardees as one of them is near and dear to my heart, to my vision for this nation, and she is a bulwark of strength for my leadership. She is seemingly unconventional in her vision, audacious in her thoughts, and bold in her actions. She has confronted us out of our complacency about giving our girls a chance in life. In all four corners of this country, her "Hands Off Our Girls" flagship resonates with young girls who once more have their voices; who once more have agency; and who believe that they can be all they want to be. She is indefatigable in her advocacy and she insists on personally distributing menstrual hygiene

kits to every girl because she wants to look at them in the eyes and talk to them from her heart about the profit of education and the strength of a confident woman.

4. But it is this belief that an investment in education yields the best dividends for inclusive and sustainable national development that has driven a key baluster of our human capital imperatives over the last five years. We have increased school financing to unprecedented levels. Enrolment and learning outcomes are unmatched. There is gender parity at the basic education levels, comprehensive safety, free school feeding programmes, school buses, and we have used ICT to deliver quality education. With radical inclusion, we have made great progress towards equity and equality of access to free quality education. We have exceeded our own expectations and the impact is being felt at the tertiary and vocational education levels.

5. For these many achievements in the last five years, I co-chair UNESCO's High-level Steering Committee on SDG 4. I co-chaired the global transforming education summit with the UN Secretary General. Sierra Leone is acknowledged the world over as making great progress towards once more becoming the "Athens of West Africa."

6. We are where we are because we have been intentional in our planning and we have been fully committed to making these first five years of reforms and targeted investments an inflection point for tertiary and higher education in this country in line with our manifesto promises. Our focus on inclusion has been heralded in a host of progressive laws and policies including The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act, radical inclusion, youth empowerment and youth-centered investment programmes, and the decriminalisation of free speech that has given Sierra Leoneans and especially young people a platform to fully participate in our democracy.

7. But beyond these general governance reforms, we have established, equipped, and provided billions of Leones in subventions to technical and vocational training institutions with a view to reskilling and upskilling training for demand-led jobs. My government has also merged and upgraded Freetown Teachers College and Government Technical Institute into a polytechnic. Our multilateral partners and partner governments have kept

the faith in our reforms and they are supporting my government with millions of dollars for skills development and higher education infrastructure support.

8. We have increased staff salaries and awarded more grants-in-aid to students especially students with disabilities and women studying STEM disciplines. For the first time ever, girls studying STEM courses can be educated from primary school through university at no expense to their parents and guardians. My government will pay the full tuition and provide other support.

9. My Government has also changed university governance for good with the review of the Universities Act – a manifesto promises kept that has granted complete autonomy to institutions of higher education. I have removed myself as chancellor and I am only now a visitor.

10. Additionally, as a consequence of the review, two polytechnics have also been upgraded to technical universities – Eastern Technical University and Milton Margai Technical University. The last APC Government promised a Kono University they never delivered after 11 years in governance. In this first term of office, construction and operationalisation of Kono University of Science and Technology is underway.

11. My Government has rolled out a comprehensive Education Sector Plan, a National Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) policy, and also introduced a Students Loan Scheme to further expand access to higher education in Sierra Leone.

12. But specifically for the University of Sierra Leone, I see an expanded role in increasing access to higher education. We can accept that we were somehow unprepared for the magnitude of the success of the free quality school education programme. I am elated by the Chancellor's announcement that we have exceeded gender parity at the University of Sierra Leone and that we now have more female students than male students. The future of Sierra Leone is indeed female.

13. But this success breeds additional challenges of infrastructural deficits – physical infrastructure, transportation infrastructure, digital infrastructure, network infrastructure, and academic and training infrastructure, among

others. In a world where everything is a priority and must be financed, I asked the university back in 2019 to look beyond government subventions. Since COVID-19 and the global economic crisis struck, this challenge has grown exponentially.

14. The chancellor alluded to the University of Sierra Leone Endowment Fund launched earlier this year by the honourable Vice President that will start working on some of these deficits. I personally commissioned the Tunde Cole Building last year and I have held up Ing Mohamed Babatunde Cole's unique act of philanthropy as truly inspirational. I am informed that a long-term librarian, Mrs Jusu-Sheriff is working on a new Library Building and Dr. Michael Colin's "Make it Happen" is working on the Architecture Building. Multilateral partners have also supported addressing these infrastructural deficits. I believe the private sector can do more. I think humanitarian organisations serving higher education can do more. I think multilateral and development partners can do more. I also look forward to engaging the University leadership in addressing outstanding needs especially in transportation, digital, network, and academic infrastructure.

15. Further, the University of Sierra Leone can increase access to higher education by leveraging new modes and platforms of instructional delivery that will take advantage of the increased ICT penetration in the country over the last five years. The Chancellor earlier said that the university is increasingly using new modes of instructional delivery to serve more students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. I am certain that development partners will be eager to hear our success stories and support an expansion of internet-based learning environments and other learning platforms.

16. I am also interested in how the re-engineering process at the university has led to the creation of new faculties and new curricula offerings. It is to our nation's advantage that research and teaching at the university are increasingly in alignment with the needs of the new and future global economy and our national development imperatives.

17. Finally, I would like to implore this set of graduands to think innovatively not only how to get jobs but how to create jobs and expand the economy. We have put in place the rudiments of industry to skills

development linkages, and the increasing use of technology and ICT in higher education so that we produce both critical thinkers and worthy graduates who can operate within a digital workspace.

18. I have encouraged more focus on entrepreneurship and for a can-do, can-innovate, can-make money attitude by our graduands. The public sector can only absorb so many graduates. There is money to be made in agriculture and agriculture value chains. There is money to be made in the service sector. There is money to be made in startups. What is needed is the right mindset, the right networks, and taking advantage of the right opportunities.

19. Let me close, again, by thanking the University of Sierra Leone for the opportunity to address this august gathering. Let me again congratulate our worthy graduands and exhort that their best days are ahead of them. They will take to fruition the investments my government is making today in higher education. The signs are good; the signs are right. Sierra Leone is on the cusp of a learning renaissance that will lead to a more inclusive and sustainable national development.

I thank you for your attention.