HOW SIERRA LEONE CAN STRENGTHEN LEGAL EDUCATION BY BALANCING ACADEMIC LEARNING, PRACTICAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY.

A Reflective Piece by Mohamed Muctarr Sow Esq., Legal Practitioner and Public Policy Scholar.

A. INTRODUCTION: A PROFESSION WE MUST PROTECT

Despite the challenges facing the legal profession today, it has long been regarded as one of Sierra Leone's important and respected professions. Lawyers are entrusted with protecting rights, advising clients, interpreting the law, representing individuals, and supporting the administration of justice. When people face criminal charges, family disputes, property-related problems, or other legal difficulties, they turn to lawyers for knowledge, guidance, and professional judgment. This responsibility begins long before a lawyer enters the courtroom. It starts in the classroom, where aspiring lawyers develop the knowledge, skills, and values that will shape their professional lives.

The Sierra Leone Law School was established on 23 February 1990, following the enactment of the Council of Legal Education Act No. 1 of 1989. It began with 26 students drawn from the 1987, 1988, and 1989 graduating classes of the Faculty of Law, Fourah Bay College. These students became known as the pioneering class.

In recent years, legal education in Sierra Leone has expanded beyond the traditional role of the Law Faculty at Fourah Bay College. More universities, including Njala University, the IMATT College, and the University of Makeni, have introduced law courses, alongside the University of London's online law programme. This expansion has created greater opportunities for students to pursue legal education within and outside the country.

While this growth is a positive development in terms of access to legal education, it has also resulted in an increasing number of law graduates seeking professional legal training at the Sierra Leone Law School before they can be called to the Bar. This raises important questions about whether the existing capacity of the Law School, its teaching methods, practical training arrangements, and professional standards are sufficiently equipped to respond to the growing number of students entering the legal profession.

Who should train the lawyers of tomorrow, and what experience should they bring into the classroom? This is the central question of my reflection. It is not an attack on young lawyers, universities, or individual lecturers. Rather, it is a call for a more thoughtful approach to legal education.

B. A REFLECTION FROM TWO GENERATIONS OF LEARNING

I belong to a generation of lawyers who received their legal education before advanced technology and artificial intelligence became part of everyday learning and professional life. During my studies at the Sierra Leone Law School, learning relied mainly on textbooks, printed materials, physical libraries, classroom discussions, and direct engagement with lecturers and legal practitioners. We mainly relied on materials commonly known as 'legacies' which were mostly handwritten notes passed down to us by previous students.

I am now pursuing postgraduate studies at a time when artificial intelligence has become an increasingly unavoidable part of education, particularly within the academic environment in which I currently find myself. Universities are therefore developing approaches to ensure that AI is used responsibly to support learning and research, while ensuring that it does not replace independent human thinking, critical analysis and genuine academic engagement.

Having experienced both learning environments, I have come to appreciate the value of each.

Traditional learning placed considerable emphasis on reading, reflection, writing, discussion, and the development of one's own understanding. Modern technology, on the other hand, offers students new ways to access information, explore ideas, and improve their learning. However, technological advancement must be accompanied by responsibility.

As Sierra Leone continues to develop its legal education system, we should embrace useful technology while ensuring that students receive the human guidance, practical training, and professional mentorship they need.

C. ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS AND PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

Universities need lecturers who can conduct research, teach legal principles, and contribute to intellectual debate. Postgraduate qualifications can deepen knowledge and strengthen teaching capacity. However, academic qualifications should not automatically be regarded as sufficient preparation for teaching every aspect of law.

There is a difference between understanding legal principles academically and applying them in practice. A lawyer who has spent years appearing before courts, advising clients, prosecuting cases, preparing legal documents, and dealing with procedural difficulties brings a form of knowledge that can enrich classroom learning. This does not mean that every experienced practitioner is automatically a good teacher. Teaching ability, subject knowledge, preparation, and professional integrity remain important. For subjects such as Civil Procedure, Criminal Procedure, Advocacy, Legal

Drafting, Professional Ethics, institutions should give serious consideration to the relevant practical experience of those responsible for teaching.

D. LOOKING BACK AT MY EXPERIENCE AT THE LAW SCHOOL.

I was called to the Sierra Leone Bar in 2011. At that time, I studied at the Sierra Leone Law School on Lamina Sankoh Street, and my class was the final batch to use the Law School at that location. We were approximately 40 students, excluding foreign students. I refer to this not to argue that legal education was necessarily better in the past or that the present system is without its advantages. Rather, it is to show how much the learning environment has changed over the years. Today's students have access to technological tools, wider learning resources, and opportunities that were not available to us to the same extent.

What I remember most, however, is the value of learning from experienced jurists and practitioners. Among those whose teaching I particularly recall was Justice Eku Roberts, Justice Glena Thompson, Justice Nicolas Brown-Marke, Justice Sulaiman A. Bah, Joseph Fitzgerald Kamara, Rowland Wright, Yada Williams, Justice Viviene Solomon, the late Justice Salamatu Koroma, and the late Eke Ahmed Halloway, among others.

These lecturers brought different forms of professional experience into the classroom. Their knowledge helped students connect legal rules with the realities of practice. I particularly remember Justice Eku Roberts teaching us Civil Procedure. His judicial experience helped us understand procedural rules in the context of how courts reason and make decisions.

Joseph F. Kamara taught us International Criminal Law while serving as Deputy Prosecutor of the Special Court for Sierra Leone at the time. His professional experience gave the subject a practical dimension and helped connect legal principles with the realities of international criminal justice.

I also remember Rowland Wright bringing cases and judgments into classroom discussions. These exercises encouraged students to consider the facts, legal issues, arguments, and reasoning behind decisions.

The late Eke Ahmed Halloway stands out in my memory for bringing real-time depositions and court records to class and asking us to analyze them and proffer legal opinions.

These experiences made learning more than an exercise in memorization. They encouraged us to examine legal materials, apply the law, and develop our own professional reasoning. That practical engagement is something I believe deserves a stronger place in legal education today.

E. CLASS SIZE, FEEDBACK, AND THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

Another feature of my experience was the relatively manageable class size. With approximately 40 students, lecturers had greater opportunities to engage with students individually and understand their strengths and weaknesses. I remember lecturers such as Joseph F. Kamara, Rowland Wright, and Justice Glena Thompson providing detailed comments on our tests and assignments. Their feedback often went beyond identifying whether an answer was correct. They could comment on individual words, the structure of an argument, the application of legal principles, and the quality of reasoning.

The recent growth in student numbers presents a different challenge. Larger classes do not automatically make effective teaching impossible, but they can place significant pressure on lecturers and institutions. With reports of the number of students admitted to the Law School in recent years reaching several hundred to a thousand and more, providing individual attention, meaningful feedback, practical exercises and adequate supervision become increasingly difficult without sufficient institutional support. This raises a question that deserves serious consideration: how can legal education institutions maintain quality and ensure effective training as student numbers continue to increase considerably? The answer may require smaller tutorial groups, additional teaching staff, better assessment systems, and greater involvement from experienced practitioners.

The objective is not to criticize lecturers, but rather to ensure that institutions have the capacity to provide students with the quality of training they deserve.

F. THE CONCERN ABOUT NEWLY QUALIFIED LAWYERS TEACHING.

This brings me to the central concern of this reflection. I have observed situations where lawyers enter teaching positions shortly after being called to the Bar, sometimes before acquiring substantial practical experience. I raise this point respectfully.

Young lawyers deserve opportunities to develop their careers and contribute to the profession. Every experienced lawyer was once newly qualified, and professional development takes time.

My concern is not that young lawyers should be excluded from teaching. It is about the timing, preparation, and level of responsibility assigned to them.

A newly qualified lawyer may still be developing practical knowledge in courtroom advocacy, legal drafting, client management, professional procedures, and independent judgment. Where a lawyer has limited practical experience, assigning substantial responsibility for teaching practice-oriented subjects requires careful consideration.

Young lawyers should be encouraged to build a strong professional foundation. At the same time, institutions should provide them with appropriate opportunities to develop as educators. The responsibility for achieving this balance lies primarily with the institutions that recruit, appoint, and supervise teaching staff.

G. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCED PRACTITIONERS

Universities have a responsibility to ensure that their teaching arrangements serve the interests of students and the long-term needs of the legal profession. Recruitment decisions should not be based mainly on convenience, availability, or cost. Academic qualifications, teaching ability, subject expertise, professional integrity, and relevant practical experience should all be considered.

Sierra Leone has experienced lawyers, judges, prosecutors, and government lawyers who possess valuable knowledge that could contribute to legal education. Their experience should not remain outside the classroom when students could benefit from it.

Some experienced practitioners may have demanding professional commitments, while others may lack sufficient encouragement, recognition, or compensation to participate in teaching. These challenges deserve attention.

If we want experienced professionals to participate meaningfully in legal education, institutions must consider flexible teaching arrangements and appropriate remuneration. The training of future lawyers should not be organized primarily around what is easiest or cheapest. It should be organized around what best prepares students for professional responsibility.

H. A BETTER APPROACH TO LEGAL EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone needs a legal education system that combines academic scholarship, practical experience, modern technology, and professional integrity. Lecturer selection should take account of academic qualifications and teaching ability, while also considering the practical experience and subject expertise required for particular courses. Practice-oriented subjects deserve special attention because students must understand how legal principles operate in real situations.

Institutions should make deliberate efforts to involve experienced practitioners in teaching, mentoring, and practical exercises. Their participation can complement academic instruction and expose students to the realities of professional practice.

The challenges created by large classes should also be addressed through appropriate tutorial arrangements, additional teaching staff, effective assessment methods, and meaningful feedback.

At the same time, young lawyers who wish to enter teaching should have structured opportunities to develop their teaching skills while gaining appropriate professional supervision and experience.

Technology and AI should form part of this modernization. Their use in legal education must be guided by academic integrity, independent reasoning, and clear institutional policies. Technology should enhance learning rather than weaken the ability of students to think critically and work independently.

These improvements will require resources and institutional commitment. Nevertheless, the quality of the legal profession makes such investment important.

I. LEGAL EDUCATION AS A PUBLIC POLICY ISSUE

As a Public Policy Scholar, I have become increasingly interested in how institutions respond to changing demands. Legal education is not merely an academic issue. It has implications for access to justice, professional accountability, public confidence, and the effectiveness of the justice system.

When more institutions offer law programmes and student numbers increase, policymakers and regulatory bodies must consider whether sufficient lecturers, facilities, training opportunities, and quality assurance mechanisms are available. When technology and AI transform the learning environment, institutions must develop appropriate policies to ensure responsible use.

These are public policy questions because they involve institutional decisions, resources, regulation, and long-term consequences.

The expansion of legal education should therefore be accompanied by a clear commitment to quality, competence, integrity, and public responsibility.

J. CONCLUSION: WE OWE THE NEXT GENERATION MORE THAN A LAW DEGREE.

I write this reflection as a lawyer who entered the legal profession in 2011 and had the privilege of learning from experienced jurists and practicing lawyers. I also write as a postgraduate student, studying at a time when technology and artificial intelligence are reshaping almost every aspect of our lives, with education being no exception.

Having experienced both traditional and modern learning environments, I believe that Sierra Leone must remain open to progress while protecting the foundations of quality legal education. We need academic lawyers, researchers, and scholars. We also need experienced practitioners who can bring practical knowledge, professional judgment, and real-world experience into the classroom. We need lecturers who can explain not only what the law says but how it works.

We need institutions that understand that the selection and preparation of teaching staff is not simply an administrative matter. It can influence the quality of lawyers produced for many years to come. I am not suggesting that every newly qualified lawyer is incapable of teaching, nor that experienced practitioners are automatically better educators. My argument is that teaching responsibilities should be assigned with careful consideration of the knowledge, experience, preparation, and competence required for each subject.

Ultimately, the quality of legal education affects more than the students who attend the classroom. It affects the clients they will represent, the courts before which they will appear, and the communities that depend on the justice system.

The student sitting in a classroom today may become a judge tomorrow, represent an accused person, advise a family, protect property, challenge an abuse of power, or defend the rights of someone who has nowhere else to turn. That is the responsibility we must keep in mind.

Sierra Leone must continue to expand access to legal education, but this expansion should go hand in hand with quality, integrity, competence, and meaningful practical training. Greater access should not come at the expense of the standards expected of the legal profession. We must therefore place greater emphasis on sound legal knowledge, practical experience, mentorship, and the professional values needed to prepare lawyers who are competent, ethical, and worthy of the public trust.

We owe the next generation more than a law degree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mohamed Muctarr Sow is a Sierra Leonean legal practitioner and public policy scholar pursuing a Master of Public Policy at Flinders University, Australia. This personal reflection forms part of his academic engagement with governance and education sector challenges in Sierra Leone, drawing on his professional experience to consider practical policy improvements in legal education.