



# SABER IN ACTION: TERTIARY EDUCATION

## BENCHMARKING EDUCATION IN LIBERIA, SIERRA LEONE, AND BANGLADESH

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SABER-Tertiary Education (SABER-TE) evaluates tertiary education services' policy environment, regulation, financing systems and quality assurance mechanisms. SABER-TE's analysis enables policymakers and development partners to learn how countries address similar policy challenges and to track differences among countries in terms of needs, policies, and practices.

In 2016, SABER-TE completed a framework paper outlining what matters most for an effective tertiary education system. In 2017, SABER-TE began to pilot its tool, which it used to evaluate tertiary education systems in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh.

## SABER-Tertiary Education (TE) Tool

Tertiary education systems around the globe are all facing similar challenges in terms of growing demand, constrained public funding, and increasing quality standards for teaching and research. SABER-TE aims to help countries to deal with these challenges by benchmarking their policies in six key domains. For each domain, the SABER team identified best practices through a systematic review of the evidence on tertiary education systems, as well as through consultations with key experts around the world. The domains are as follows:

1. **Strong vision for tertiary education.** Does the country have a vision and plan for the tertiary education sector? What actions are being taken to implement this vision—is it being translated into actionable policy?
2. **A clear regulatory framework.** Is the tertiary education system based on an appropriate regulatory framework that supports the work of tertiary education providers for the benefit of students and the public?
3. **Modern governance and university autonomy.** Does the tertiary education system have adequate structures, policies, and processes that enable tertiary education institutions to operate efficiently and effectively? How is policy articulated? Is there institutional autonomy?
4. **Financing that promotes performance and equity.** Is the country using public financing to steer tertiary education toward envisioned system-wide goals? What is the coverage of resources allocation, what resources are allocated, and how are these resources used in practice?



5. **Independent quality assurance.** What is the state of quality assurance? How are countries performing vis-a-vis accreditation and institutional quality standards and tertiary education management information systems?
6. **Relevance for social and economic needs.** Does tertiary education support research and development activities that respond to local conditions, resources and needs? Does tertiary education support an institutional orientation towards social development?

To answer these questions, SABER-TE collects data using an extensive questionnaire detailing the policy environment for tertiary education. This data is collected during fieldwork, validated with key interview participants, and then scored using a rubric. Data collected are all made available upon request.

## Piloting the Tool

Beginning in January 2017, the SABER-TE team piloted its benchmarking tool in three countries to gather data about tertiary education and to learn lessons about how to best calibrate the questionnaire. The three pilot countries—Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh—represented low and middle-income countries. In each country, SABER-TE analyzed relevant legislation, policy reports, research and key indicators. SABER-TE met with a wide range of stakeholders, and developed reports offering specific policy recommendations tailored to each country's tertiary education context.

### Liberia

Liberian higher education has been in disarray following a brutal civil war and the recent Ebola epidemic. Many intellectuals have died or escaped the country, leaving only 40 professors with PhDs in the entire country and no Liberian universities that offer PhD programs. Despite this challenging context, Liberia has a growing tertiary education sector with 33 tertiary education institutions serving about 55,000 students. Demand is likely to grow, given that over 75 percent of the population is below 30 years of age.



The SABER-TE team introduced its new tool to Minister George Werner and held several meetings at the Ministry of Education, as well as with the National Commission for Higher Education, the main regulatory body for tertiary education. The SABER-TE team also met with the leadership of the Association of Liberian Universities, individual university leaders, and stakeholders such as the student union, donor partners and non-governmental organizations.

The SABER-TE team found that the Liberian government has a good vision for its tertiary education system, though that vision has been



difficult to realize. Moving forward, SABER-TE recommended that Liberia work on financing, quality assurance, and improving the relevance of tertiary education. Financing rules could be made more transparent and universities could be better held accountable for their use of public funding. Quality assurance could be strengthened if it becomes more independent from politics and tertiary education institutions, and by systematically collecting data on tertiary education in an Education Management Information System. The relevance of tertiary education can be improved by directing research and donor investments to productive sectors such as agriculture and engineering.

## Sierra Leone



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KOEN GEVEN / WORLD BANK

Liberia's neighbor, Sierra Leone, is also recovering from a civil war (1992-2002) and the Ebola crisis. These crises significantly impacted Sierra Leone's education system. Nonetheless, the country has a long history of providing tertiary education to its citizens, and diverse forms of tertiary education are reemerging. In 2011, there were 32 tertiary education institutions registered with the Tertiary Education Commission, including a mixture of public and private universities, technical colleges, and polytechnics. Around 75 percent of the population is below age 35 and demand for tertiary education is growing.

The SABER-TE team presented its framework to the Ministry of Education, the main regulatory bodies, the National Council for Technical and Vocational Education, and the Tertiary Education Commission. In addition, the SABER-TE team visited universities, TVET institutions, and polytechnics. Through these discussions, the SABER-TE team learned that the Sierra Leone government and other tertiary education stakeholders were particularly concerned about quality assurance and developing more transparent financing arrangements.

The SABER-TE team suggested that Sierra Leone's tertiary education system could benefit from developing a fully-fledged vision for tertiary education, taking into account the specific needs of universities, polytechnics, and TVET institutions. In addition, SABER-TE recommended that Sierra Leone strengthen its regulatory measures, particularly for the TVET sector, where private institutions are being created without any proper supervision from any regulatory body. SABER-TE also encouraged the government to orient public financing towards performance—perhaps with the assistance of development partners—and to strengthen quality assurance procedures.

## Bangladesh

Unlike Liberia and Sierra Leone, Bangladesh has a booming economy and one of the largest tertiary education systems in the world. In 2015, Bangladesh had nearly 4,000 tertiary education institutions, with 4.4 million enrolled



students—up from 2.6 million enrolled students in 2010. Bangladesh’s tertiary education sector contains universities, colleges, and TVET institutions, each offered in both public and private versions.

SABER-TE collaborated closely with Bangladesh’s main regulatory agencies, namely the University Grants Commission, the National University, the Department for Technical Education, and the Bangladesh Technical Education Board. The SABER-TE team held a number of meetings with institutions and stakeholders, including data validation workshops with the main stakeholders in the university sector, college, and TVET sectors. SABER-TE found that the Bangladeshi tertiary education system was particularly complex due to the different forms of regulation and regulatory bodies for each subsector, without any overarching coordination. This complexity proves challenging for policymakers to manage, especially given the strong politicization of leadership in the tertiary education sector.

The SABER-TE team concluded that Bangladesh could benefit from a government-led overarching vision for tertiary education coupled with greater integration between the different tertiary education subsectors. This would encourage students to take a more informed choice about where to study, provide some consumer protection, and encourage pathways of collaboration between institutional types. In addition, the SABER-TE team recommended performance-based funding for universities and greater financial autonomy in colleges and TVET institutions, in conjunction with introducing measures to regulate the rapidly growing private sector.

## Next steps

The pilot revealed that countries care deeply about the policy domains addressed in the SABER instrument. Nonetheless, the pilot offered some constructive lessons. The Liberian pilot underscored the need for SABER-TE to focus on broader governance challenges than the team originally anticipated. The Sierra Leone pilot pushed the SABER-TE team to think about broader issues in the political economy of tertiary education reform. The Bangladesh pilot underscored the importance of having a tool flexible enough to analyze a wide variety of tertiary education institutions. These lessons allowed the SABER-TE team to better calibrate its tool so that it may better identify and diagnose pressing issues in the tertiary education policy environment. This tool will enable SABER-TE to better serve clients, helping them to bring their tertiary education systems to a globally competitive level.



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