

GAMBIA: Plans to develop higher education

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 The Gambia - resource-poor, under-developed and the smallest country in Africa - has launched a 10-year higher education strategy to build its human resources and strengthen tertiary infrastructure. The aim is to produce the high-level intellectual and technical skills essential to drive socio-economic and technological development.

The country, surrounded by Senegal except for a small Atlantic Ocean coastline, has a population of some 1.7 million people, about a third of whom live below the poverty line of US\$1.25 a day.

The Gambian government has been building educational infrastructure since taking power in a bloodless military coup in 1994. President Yahya Jammeh and the APRC party won subsequent elections.

Higher education is being given a boost through a recently created Ministry for Higher Education, Research and Technology. The sector's development could be built on to establish a strong science and technology culture, Pa Tamba Ngom, a researcher in the nutrition programme of the Medical Research Council in Gambia, told *University World News*.

President Jammeh is leading efforts to establish a science and technology academy in his home village near the western town of Kanilai. The academy will help tackle a shortage of scientists in different sectors of the economy by preparing school pupils for university-level science, technology and mathematics courses.

Higher education in The Gambia is mostly provided by the University of The Gambia - a hybrid of North American, European and African universities that was created in 1999. It comprises four faculties and Gambia College. There are schools of agriculture, science, education, nursing and midwifery, and public health.

With assistance from Venezuela, the university will construct a new science department with modern infrastructure and equipment, to be completed in 2010.

Under the higher education plan, the University of The Gambia will establish relationships with other tertiary institutions in the country to strengthen its infrastructure and develop the nucleus for an enduring and sustainable higher education system.

The Gambia is also aiming to integrate and consolidate higher education institutions and structures, in an effort to use available resources more efficiently and effectively and to develop a robust sector that is more responsive to student and labour market needs.

The government and institutions will also organise - in partnership with international higher education institutions - training programmes to provide staff development and operational assistance, and to strengthen higher education governance structures, policy formulation, strategic planning, and administrative and management systems.

"The main challenges for higher education in The Gambia are largely to do with the lack of home-grown scientists as well as limited options for Gambian scientists to find work in local learning institutions, which forces them to either leave the country or not return home after carrying out PhD studies abroad," said Ngom.

As in most African countries, Ngom added, there are few opportunities for lecturers who also suffer poor financial benefits and lack of facilities. As a result, many work in private facilities or institutions such as the Medical Research Council, "where the heavy work load means serving the university is difficult".

The Gambian government has a clear policy on developing science and technology but lack of finances is hindering progress. Indeed, more financial, physical and human resources will be needed if the government's good higher education intentions are to succeed.

Organisations such as the Islamic Development Bank are helping, but more funds need to be released for projects such as higher education in The Gambia, for instance to sponsor well-resourced academic posts and science departments. Higher education should be supported in low-income countries showing proactive interest in developing the sector, Ngom argued.