

Institutional Commitment and the Role of Higher Education in Peacebuilding in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This study examined the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting peace education and peacebuilding in post-war Sierra Leone. A descriptive survey research design employing a mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data was collected from 43 participants across five higher education institutions using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data was collected from 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and 16 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ), while qualitative data were analysed thematically through triangulation. The findings revealed that 92.7% of respondents confirmed the availability of peace education programmes, while 59.5% reported the existence of dedicated peace academic units. However, only 36.6% indicated that their institutions had substantial and recurring funding, identifying financial sustainability as the major institutional challenge. Institutional commitment indicators showed strong positive relationships, with the highest correlation observed between mission statements referencing peace and strategic plans including peace objectives ($\rho = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$). Regarding the role of HEIs, policies preventing political and ethnic tensions recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.03$), while collaboration with government agencies and civil society organizations recorded the lowest ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.02$). The strongest peacebuilding relationship was between student unions promoting peace values and universities serving as key drivers of peace ($\rho = 0.764$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative findings showed that although HEIs have integrated peace

education into institutional activities, implementation remains fragmented due to inconsistent programme visibility, limited funding, and uneven student awareness. Participants emphasized curriculum integration, inclusive governance, stronger institutional partnerships, and permanent peace centres as essential for sustainable peacebuilding. The study concludes that HEIs are strategic institutions for fostering peace, reconciliation, and national cohesion in Sierra Leone, but their effectiveness depends on stronger institutional commitment, sustainable financing, and integrated implementation. It recommends mainstreaming peace education across all academic programmes, establishing dedicated peace centres with protected institutional budgets, strengthening partnerships with government and civil society organizations, and enhancing student participation in peacebuilding initiatives to ensure long-term sustainability and societal impact.

Keywords

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Peace Education, Peacebuilding, National Cohesion, Mixed-Methods Research, Post-War Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Peace is widely recognized as a cornerstone of sustainable development, social cohesion, and economic prosperity (Jones et al., 2025; Sharifi & Simangan, 2021). In response to increasing global challenges such as political instability, violent conflict, social inequality, and climate-related insecurity, education has emerged as a key strategy for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (Kowkas et al., 2024; Milton, 2021). Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a vital role in this agenda by fostering values of tolerance, civic responsibility, dialogue, and non-violent conflict resolution through teaching, research, and community engagement (Kester & Misiaszek, 2025; Motsoene, 2025).

Globally, universities have expanded their traditional mandates of teaching, research, and community engagement to include peacebuilding and social transformation (Pherali & Lewis, 2019). Through peace education, conflict resolution programmes, research, civic engagement, mediation initiatives, and partnerships with governments and civil society organizations, higher education institutions foster socially responsible graduates equipped to promote peaceful coexistence, democratic governance, and social cohesion (Adan, 2025; Milton, 2021). Institutional commitment to peacebuilding extends beyond curriculum delivery to integrating peace values into institutional policies, governance, student services, campus culture, and community outreach. Evidence indicates that universities with strong institutional commitment to peace education contribute significantly to reducing prejudice, strengthening intercultural dialogue, enhancing social cohesion, and preparing graduates to address complex societal challenges through peaceful and

non-violent approaches (Peyrache, 2025; Qadri et al., 2024).

Across Africa, higher education institutions play an increasingly important role in promoting peace, democratic participation, and national reconciliation amid persistent challenges such as political instability, violent extremism, ethnic tensions, and resource-based conflicts (Ahmad, 2024; Odey et al., 2024). Many universities have introduced peace education, conflict resolution, civic engagement, and community outreach programmes aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2063 vision of a peaceful and inclusive continent (Assefa, 2025). In West Africa, where civil conflicts, political transitions, and security challenges remain prevalent, universities contribute to peacebuilding through curriculum development, research, leadership programmes, and partnerships (Johnson, 2019). However, their effectiveness is constrained by limited institutional commitment, inadequate funding, weak policy frameworks, insufficient staff capacity, and poor integration of peacebuilding into university governance and academic programmes (Russell, 2021; Milton, 2021).

Sierra Leone provides an important context for examining institutional commitment to peacebuilding due to ongoing challenges such as youth unemployment, political polarization, social inequalities, and electoral tensions despite significant post-war progress since 2002. The government has prioritized education as a tool for national reconciliation by promoting civic responsibility, social inclusion, and democratic participation, while universities have integrated peace-related themes into teaching, research, and community engagement (Novelli & Higgins, 2017). As institutions that bring together students from diverse backgrounds, universities are well positioned to foster tolerance, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence through strong institutional commitment to peace education. However, the extent to which peacebuilding has been institutionalized through university policies, curricula, governance, and campus practices remains inadequately documented. Given the limited empirical evidence on the role of higher education in peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, this study examines institutional commitment, assesses universities' contributions to peacebuilding, and identifies opportunities and challenges for strengthening their role in promoting social cohesion, national reconciliation, and sustainable peace.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design using a mixed-methods approach to examine the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting peace education in post-war Sierra Leone. Quantitative data were collected from students, lecturers, administrators, and peace education practitioners to assess the status, implementation, challenges, and impact of peace education programmes, while qualitative data from interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, institutional strategies, pedagogical approaches, and implementation challenges. The study focused on selected public and private universities offering peace-related programmes. A phenomenological perspective guided

the qualitative component to capture lived experiences, and triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the study.

2.2. Description of the Study Area

The study was conducted in Sierra Leone, a post-conflict West African country bordered by Guinea, Liberia, and the Atlantic Ocean (8.46°N, 11.78°W), with a population of approximately 8.4 million. Following the devastating civil war (1991-2002), which caused significant loss of life, displacement, and human rights violations, the country has prioritized peacebuilding, reconciliation, and national development. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have become key platforms for promoting peace education and social cohesion in line with the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The study focused on five universities: Fourah Bay College (FBC), the oldest university in West Africa, offering programmes in arts, sciences, engineering, and law; Njala University (NU), specializing in agriculture, education, environmental science, and health sciences; University of Makeni (UNIMAK), a private Catholic university with programmes supporting peacebuilding; Every Nation College (ENC) affiliated with Earnest Bai Koroma University of Technology and Science; and Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETU-SL), a multi-campus institution providing technical, educational, and professional training. These institutions were selected because of their active roles in peace education, civic engagement, and post-war reconstruction, making them appropriate settings for examining the role of HEIs in promoting peace education in Sierra Leone.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Procedure

This study employed a multistage mixed-methods sampling design to examine the role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting peace education in Sierra Leone. The sampling strategy combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain both statistically representative data and in-depth insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to peace education. The target population comprised key stakeholders from TEC-accredited higher education institutions and national peacebuilding organizations. Participants included university administrators, academic and administrative staff, undergraduate students, student leaders, and representatives from the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC) and the ETUSL Early Warning and Response Mechanism Centre (EWRMC). The study was conducted in five higher education institutions representing different regions of Sierra Leone: Fourah Bay College (University of Sierra Leone), Njala University, University of Makeni, Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone, and Every Nation College.

Quantitative data was collected from 43 participants across five higher education institutions using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data was collected from 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and 16 Key Informant Inter-

views (KIIs). The qualitative component consisted of 30 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 240 students (6 - 8 participants per group), 16 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with university administrators, student peace club members, student leaders, and representatives of the ETUSL Early Warning and Response Mechanism Centre (EWRMC), drawn from peace-related disciplines and university management. Sample selection was based on the study objectives, population characteristics, and available resources. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants, while all available full-time lecturers and administrators involved in peace-related programmes were included to ensure comprehensive and reliable representation.

2.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using a mixed-methods approach that combined structured questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), document review, and personal observation. The structured questionnaire gathered quantitative data through closed-ended questions, including five-point Likert scale items aligned with the study objectives and categorical questions on institutional characteristics, such as the existence of peace education programmes, funding sources, external partnerships, and community engagement. The qualitative component used structured FGD and KII guides with predetermined questions to obtain consistent and comparable information from students, academic and administrative staff, university leaders, and representatives of peacebuilding institutions. Following data collection, completed questionnaires were compiled into a single dataset and underwent data screening and cleaning to ensure completeness and accuracy. Multi-response items were recoded into separate indicator variables, categorical responses were standardized, and invalid or non-applicable responses were treated as missing values to facilitate consistent statistical analysis. The study also utilized primary data, collected directly from respondents through questionnaires, FGDs, KIIs, and observations, and secondary data, obtained from scholarly publications, policy documents, and other relevant literature to provide contextual information and support the interpretation of findings.

Three key constructs were operationalized: institutional commitment, peace education programme, and peacebuilding role. Institutional commitment was assessed through indicators such as programme availability, dedicated peace units, coordination mechanisms, peace-related objectives in institutional plans and policies, and financial support. Peace education programme referred to formal educational activities promoting peace, conflict prevention, resolution, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence. The peacebuilding role of HEIs was assessed based on their contribution to peace, social cohesion, conflict prevention, community engagement, and peace initiatives.

The questionnaire was developed in line with the study objectives and reviewed by supervisors and subject-matter experts to establish content validity. A pilot study conducted outside the study area helped assess clarity and consistency, leading to revision

of ambiguous items before data collection. However, no numerical internal-consistency measure such as Cronbach's alpha was reported in the study documentation.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, as well as inferential statistics. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) was used to examine relationships among key variables. For correlation analyses, Spearman's ρ was calculated using the valid responses available for each pair of variables. Missing, invalid, and non-applicable responses were excluded from the relevant analyses, while "I do not know" responses were treated as missing for institutional-characteristic items. Consequently, the valid sample size varied across correlations where item-level missing occurred. The correlation analyses represent individual respondents' perceptions of institutional policies, practices, and peacebuilding activities rather than independent institution-level measures. Therefore, the findings are interpreted as perceived institutional characteristics and should not be regarded as objective characteristics of the five institutions. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis, and findings from the quantitative and qualitative approaches were triangulated to enhance the validity, reliability, and comprehensiveness of the study. Ethical approval was obtained before data collection, while informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the research process.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection commenced. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing personal identifiers, securely storing data in coded and encrypted formats accessible only to the researcher and supervisor, and reporting findings only in aggregate form. The study adhered to established research ethics principles, including respect for participants, secure data management, and responsible handling and disposal of research data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The study involved 43 respondents drawn from five higher education institutions in Sierra Leone. The largest proportion of participants came from University of Makeni (44.19%), followed by Eastern Technical University (18.60%), while Njala University and University of Sierra Leone each contributed 13.95% of respondents (**Table 1**). Most institutions were located in the Northwest Region (34.88%), followed by the Southern Region (20.93%) and Eastern Region (18.60%). The respondents were predominantly male (76.74%), with females accounting for

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
University/Institution	University of Makeni (UNIMAK)	19	44.19
	Eastern Technical University (ETU)	8	18.60
	Njala University (NU)	6	13.95
	University of Sierra Leone (USL)	6	13.95
	Every Nation College	4	9.30
Primary Regional Location	Northwest Region	15	34.88
	Southern Region	9	20.93
	Eastern Region	8	18.60
	Western Area	6	13.95
	North-Eastern Region	4	9.30
	Other/Unspecified	1	2.33
Age Group (Years)	18 - 25	2	4.65
	26 - 33	10	23.26
	34 - 41	12	27.91
	42 - 49	9	20.93
	50 - 57	7	16.28
	58 - 65	2	4.65
	Above 65	1	2.33
Sex	Male	33	76.74
	Female	9	20.93
	Unspecified	1	2.33
Highest Qualification	Bachelor's Degree	17	39.53
	Master's Degree	16	37.21
	PhD	7	16.28
	MPhil	3	6.98
Occupation	Lecturer	24	55.81
	Administrator	9	20.93
	Student	3	6.98
	Project Officer	3	6.98
	Researcher	1	2.33
	Head of Department (HOD)	1	2.33
	Internship Student	1	2.33
	Other	1	2.33
Years of Experience in Present Position	Below 5 years	18	41.86
	6 - 10 years	11	25.58
	11 - 15 years	5	11.63
	Above 15 years	9	20.93
Total		43	100.00

20.93%. In terms of age, the largest group was between 34 - 41 years (27.91%), followed by those aged 26 - 33 years (23.26%) and 42 - 49 years (20.93%), indicating that most participants were within their active professional years. Regarding educational attainment, respondents were highly educated, with 39.53% holding Bachelor's degrees, 37.21% Master's degrees, and 16.28% PhDs, reflecting a well-qualified sample capable of providing informed perspectives on university peacebuilding initiatives. Occupationally, Lecturers constituted the majority (55.81%), followed by Administrators (20.93%), highlighting the prominence of academic and managerial staff in the study. Concerning work experience, 41.86% had less than five years in their current position, while 25.58% had between six and ten years of experience. This suggests a mix of relatively new and experienced personnel, providing diverse perspectives on institutional peacebuilding policies and practices. Overall, the demographic profile reveals that the respondents were predominantly educated university professionals actively involved in implementing, managing, or supporting institutional peacebuilding initiatives across Sierra Leone's higher education sector.

3.2. Status of Peace Education and Institutional Commitment

The findings indicate a strong institutional commitment to peace education among the surveyed institutions. The highest response rate was recorded for the availability of a Peace Education programme, where 92.7% ($n = 38$) of respondents confirmed that their institutions offer peace education programmes, while only 7.3% ($n = 3$) (**Table 2**) reported that no such programme exists. This suggests that peace education has been widely integrated into institutional teaching and learning activities, reflecting growing recognition of its importance in promoting social cohesion, conflict prevention, and sustainable development (Sekibo & Iroye, 2024; Añaños et al., 2020). Similarly, institutional structures supporting peace education appear relatively well established. Regarding the existence of a dedicated peace academic unit, the largest proportion of respondents (59.5%, $n = 25$) indicated that their institutions have a fully established and active unit. An additional 16.7% ($n = 7$) reported having a relatively new unit, while another 16.7% ($n = 7$) stated that plans are underway to establish one within the next three years. Only 7.1% ($n = 3$) were uncertain. These findings suggest that many institutions have moved beyond programme implementation to establish formal organizational structures for peace-related activities (Moiwo, 2026; Opiyo, 2024). The results on coordinating mechanisms show a more mixed picture. Although 33.3% ($n = 14$) reported having a clearly designated coordinating unit, substantial proportions indicated shared responsibilities (21.4%, $n = 9$) or were uncertain about coordination arrangements (19.0%, $n = 8$). This variation suggests that while peace education programmes exist in many institutions, coordination structures may not yet be fully institutionalized across all institutions (Smith et al., 2016). The least favorable and most variable indicator was the availability of financial resources for peace work. Only 36.6% ($n = 15$) reported having substantial and recurring funding

Table 2. Status of peace education and institutional commitment.

Indicator	Response	N	%
Peace Education programme offered	YES	38	92.7
Peace Education programme offered	NO	3	7.3
Dedicated peace academic unit (Yes/No)	Yes, a fully established and active unit exist.	25	59.5
Dedicated peace academic unit (Yes/No)	Yes, but it is relatively new (less than 3 years old) or its activities are limited.	7	16.7
Dedicated peace academic unit (Yes/No)	No, but there are plans to establish one in the next 3 years.	7	16.7
Dedicated peace academic unit (Yes/No)	I don't know.	3	7.1
Coordinating committee exists (Yes/No)	Yes, clearly designated unit.	14	33.3
Coordinating committee exists (Yes/No)	Yes, but the responsibility is shared or implicit.	9	21.4
Coordinating committee exists (Yes/No)	Yes, clearly designated.	8	19.0
Coordinating committee exists (Yes/No)	I don't know.	8	19.0
Coordinating committee exists (Yes/No)	No	3	7.1
Financial resources for peace work (Yes/No)	Yes, substantial and recurring: There is a specific protected budget line in the institutional core budget for peace education research, teaching, or community projects.	15	36.6
Financial resources for peace work (Yes/No)	No dedicated funding: Activities rely entirely on the voluntary efforts of staff and students or incidental resources.	10	24.4
Financial resources for peace work (Yes/No)	I don't know.	7	17.1
Financial resources for peace work (Yes/No)	Yes, but project-dependent: Funding is primarily secured through external grants, donor projects, or partnerships, and is not guaranteed from core funds.	7	17.1
Financial resources for peace work (Yes/No)	Yes, but minimal: A very small amount is allocated informally or as part of a broader budget (e.g., General research fund).	2	4.9

Note: Percentages are based on the valid responses for each indicator/item rather than the total sample of 43 respondents. Thus, denominators vary due to missing or non-applicable responses, which were excluded only from the affected item. "I do not know" responses were retained as valid responses and included in the denominator. Therefore, percentages represent the distribution of responses among respondents with valid data for each indicator, and no respondent was excluded from the overall study because of item-level missing data.

through dedicated budget allocations. In contrast, 24.4% (n = 10) indicated that there was no dedicated funding, with activities relying on voluntary efforts and incidental resources. Furthermore, 17.1% (n = 7) reported dependence on external project-based funding, while another 17.1% (n = 7) were unsure about funding arrangements. The smallest response category was institutions with minimal funding (4.9%, n = 2). These findings highlight funding as the greatest institutional challenge to sustaining peace education initiatives (Pherali & Lewis, 2019).

Spearman Correlations among Peace Building and Institutional-Commitment

The Spearman correlation analysis reveals significant positive relationships among all indicators of institutional commitment to peace, justice, and social cohesion, suggesting that institutions that demonstrate commitment in one policy area are likely to exhibit commitment in related strategic and governance structures. The strongest correlation was observed between Mission Statement references peace and Strategic Plan includes peace objectives ($\rho = 0.705$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). This strong positive relationship indicates that institutions that explicitly incorporate peace-related values into their mission statements are also highly likely to translate these values into concrete strategic objectives and operational plans. This finding suggests a high degree of alignment between institutional philosophy and strategic implementation (Aquino & Rivano, 2026; Ho et al., 2021). Similarly, a strong correlation was found between Clear policy on peace, justice and cohesion and Mission Statement references peace ($\rho = 0.683$, $p < 0.001$), as well as between Mission Statement references peace and Vision Statement references peace ($\rho = 0.645$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that institutions with formal peace-related policies tend to embed peace principles consistently across their core guiding documents, reflecting a coherent institutional commitment to peacebuilding (Volkdal, 2025; Hamilton, 2021). Moderately strong correlations were also observed between Vision Statement references peace and Strategic Plan includes peace objectives ($\rho = 0.553$, $p < 0.001$), Clear policy on peace, justice and cohesion and Strategic Plan includes peace objectives ($\rho = 0.528$, $p < 0.001$), and Mission Statement references peace and Standalone peace policy document exists ($\rho = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that institutions with peace-oriented visions and policies are more likely to formalize such commitments through strategic planning and dedicated policy frameworks (Kim & Suh, 2026; Grajales et al., 2026). The weakest but still statistically significant correlation was found between Vision

Table 3. Spearman correlations among institutional-commitment items.

Item A	Item B	rho	p	Sig
Clear policy on peace, justice & cohesion	Mission Statement references peace	0.683	0.0	***
Clear policy on peace, justice & cohesion	Vision Statement references peace	0.421	0.0062	**
Clear policy on peace, justice & cohesion	Strategic Plan includes peace objectives	0.528	0.0004	***
Clear policy on peace, justice & cohesion	Standalone peace policy document exists	0.412	0.0075	**
Mission Statement references peace	Vision Statement references peace	0.645	0.0	***
Mission Statement references peace	Strategic Plan includes peace objectives	0.705	0.0	***
Mission Statement references peace	Standalone peace policy document exists	0.585	0.0001	***
Vision Statement references peace	Strategic Plan includes peace objectives	0.553	0.0002	***
Vision Statement references peace	Standalone peace policy document exists	0.352	0.024	*
Strategic Plan includes peace objectives	Standalone peace policy document exists	0.379	0.0146	*

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant ($p \geq 0.05$).

Statement references peace and Standalone peace policy document exists ($\rho = 0.352$, $p = 0.024$). Although positive, this weaker association suggests that some institutions may articulate peace values in their vision statements without necessarily developing separate policy documents to support implementation (Donais & McCandless, 2017; Millar, 2021). Likewise, the relationship between Strategic Plan includes peace objectives and Standalone peace policy document exists ($\rho = 0.379$, $p = 0.015$) was relatively modest, indicating that strategic commitment does not always translate into dedicated policy instruments. Hence, all correlations were positive and statistically significant, ranging from $\rho = 0.352$ to $\rho = 0.705$, demonstrating a high degree of consistency among institutional commitment indicators. The findings suggest that peace-related values embedded in mission and vision statements are generally reinforced through policies and strategic plans, reflecting an integrated approach to institutional peacebuilding.

The qualitative findings from FGDs and KIIs revealed that peace education within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sierra Leone is characterized by visible but fragmented institutional commitment. While students acknowledged the existence of peace-related programmes and activities, they reported that these initiatives were often inconsistent, insufficiently promoted, and lacked sustained institutional visibility. This indicates a gap between formal institutional provision and students' actual awareness and engagement with peace education. The findings further showed that students' awareness and entry into Peace and Conflict Studies followed multiple and uneven pathways. A dominant theme was structurally mediated entry, where many students joined peace education programmes not through deliberate choice but due to limited admission opportunities in their preferred disciplines. This suggests that peace education is not yet widely perceived as a primary academic or career pathway and highlights the need for stronger programme visibility, career guidance, and institutional positioning.

However, participants also described a process of gradual cognitive transformation through academic exposure, where students developed a deeper understanding of peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and the relevance of peace education through coursework. In many cases, peace concepts were embedded within broader disciplines rather than explicitly presented as a distinct field, leading to delayed recognition of the discipline's importance.

The qualitative evidence also highlighted the important role of NGOs and extracurricular activities in promoting peace education awareness. Workshops, sensitization programmes, and campus-based initiatives provided practical experiences that complemented university teaching by connecting theoretical knowledge with real-world peacebuilding practices. Additionally, some students demonstrated experiential and contextual awareness shaped by Sierra Leone's history of civil conflict. Personal and collective memories of conflict influenced students' understanding of the importance of peace, positioning peace education not only as an academic subject but also as a social responsibility.

Thus, the qualitative findings reveal a contrast between the formal availability

of peace education and students' pathways to awareness and engagement. Although HEIs provide peace education opportunities, awareness remains influenced by institutional structures, academic exposure, external actors, and personal experiences. Strengthening visibility, integrating peace education across curricula, and developing sustained awareness strategies are therefore essential for transforming peace education into a more intentional and valued academic field.

3.3. Role of Higher Education Institutions in Peacebuilding

Table 4 presents respondents' perceptions of the role played by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in promoting peace, social cohesion, and conflict prevention. The highest-rated indicator was "Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions" with a mean score of 4.48 (SD = 1.03) and 85.7% agreement (**Table 4**). This suggests that respondents perceived institutional policies as effective mechanisms for promoting inclusivity, reducing discrimination, and preventing conflicts based on political, ethnic, or social differences (Nanes, 2020; Oyeyipo et al., 2024). The high median score of 5.0 further indicates strong confidence in the role of institutional policies in maintaining harmony within higher education environments (Din et al., 2025; Casarejos et al., 2017). Similarly, "Leadership prioritises peacebuilding" recorded a high mean score of 4.41 (SD = 1.00) with 87.8% agreement, representing the highest percentage agreement among all indicators (**Table 4**). This finding highlights the importance of institutional leadership in fostering peace-oriented cultures, supporting peace initiatives, and integrating peacebuilding into university governance and decision-making processes (Peyrache, 2025). The lowest-rated indicator was "Collaborates with MDAs and NGOs/CSOs", which recorded a mean score of 3.95 (SD = 1.02) and 76.2% agreement (**Table 4**). Although still positive, this comparatively lower rating suggests that collaboration with government ministries, departments, agencies, and civil society organizations may be less extensive or less visible than internal peacebuilding activities. This finding points to an opportunity for strengthening partnerships and multi-stakeholder approaches to peacebuilding. The median score of 5.0 for most indicators and the

Table 4. Role of higher education institutions in peace building.

Item	N	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Agree (4 + 5) %
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	21	4.48	1.03	5.0	1.0	85.7
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	41	4.41	1.00	5.0	1.0	87.8
University-led initiatives are impactful	41	4.37	1.04	5.0	1.0	82.9
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	40	4.30	1.20	5.0	1.0	82.5
Works with traditional/community leaders	41	4.27	1.18	5.0	1.0	82.9
University is key driver of peace	35	4.23	1.21	5.0	1.0	80.0
Student unions promote peace values	41	4.22	1.19	5.0	1.0	82.9
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	41	4.17	1.09	4.0	1.0	82.9
Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	21	3.95	1.02	4.0	1.0	76.2

relatively small interquartile ranges (IQR = 1.0) indicate strong consensus among respondents regarding the positive role of HEIs in peace promotion (Hassan, 2025; Mohamed et al., 2025).

Spearman Correlations among Role of Higher Education Institutions in Peace Building

Table 5 presents the Spearman rank-order correlation coefficients examining relationships among different dimensions of the perceived role of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in peacebuilding. The results show a mixture of strong, moderate, weak, and non-significant associations, indicating that some perceived peacebuilding functions are closely interconnected, whereas others appear to operate relatively independently. The strongest positive association was observed between “Student unions promote peace values” and “University is a key driver of peace” ($\rho = 0.764$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that respondents who reported stronger promotion of peace values by student unions also tended to perceive their universities as important drivers of peacebuilding. A similarly strong association was found between “Collaborates with MDAs and NGOs/CSOs” and “Student unions promote peace values” ($\rho = 0.743$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, “Leadership prioritises peacebuilding” was strongly associated with “Collaborates with MDAs and NGOs/CSOs” ($\rho = 0.742$, $p < 0.001$). These findings suggest that, from respondents’ perspectives, student engagement, institutional leadership, and external collaboration tend to occur together within HEI peacebuilding activities (Akinyetun et al., 2023; Cromwell, 2024; Grizelj, 2022; Ahmed & Shahzad, 2021; Brunk, 2016; Ogunsola & Babatope, 2025).

Table 5. Spearman correlations among role of higher education institutions in peace building.

Item A	Item B	rho	p	Sig
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Campus encourages peaceful resolution	0.029	0.8596	ns
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	0.266	0.2433	ns
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Organises seminars/workshops on peace	0.518	0.0005	***
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	0.742	0.0001	***
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Student unions promote peace values	0.427	0.0054	**
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	University is key driver of peace	0.25	0.1468	ns
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.232	0.1439	ns
Leadership prioritises peacebuilding	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.59	0.0	***
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	0.464	0.0394	*
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	Organises seminars/workshops on peace	0.092	0.5739	ns
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	0.598	0.0054	**
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	Student unions promote peace values	0.523	0.0005	***
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	University is key driver of peace	0.559	0.0006	***
Campus encourages peaceful resolution	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.51	0.0008	***

Continued

Campus encourages peaceful resolution	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.388	0.0135	*
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	Organises seminars/workshops on peace	0.311	0.1704	ns
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	0.126	0.5864	ns
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	Student unions promote peace values	0.282	0.2156	ns
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	University is key driver of peace	0.465	0.0338	*
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.596	0.0043	**
Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.463	0.0344	*
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	0.586	0.0052	**
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	Student unions promote peace values	0.353	0.0238	*
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	University is key driver of peace	0.176	0.3116	ns
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.246	0.1206	ns
Organises seminars/workshops on peace	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.447	0.0034	**
Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	Student unions promote peace values	0.743	0.0001	***
Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	University is key driver of peace	0.486	0.0254	*
Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.533	0.0129	*
Collaborates with MDAs & NGOs/CSOs	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.661	0.0011	**
Student unions promote peace values	University is key driver of peace	0.764	0.0	***
Student unions promote peace values	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.677	0.0	***
Student unions promote peace values	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.628	0.0	***
University is key driver of peace	Works with traditional/community leaders	0.547	0.0007	***
University is key driver of peace	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.552	0.0006	***
Works with traditional/community leaders	University-led initiatives are impactful	0.606	0.0	***

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant ($p \geq 0.05$).

Another notable association was observed between “Works with traditional/community leaders” and “University-led initiatives are impactful” ($\rho = 0.606$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that respondents who reported greater engagement between universities and traditional or community leaders were also more likely to perceive university-led peace initiatives as impactful. The finding highlights the perceived importance of community engagement in institutional peacebuilding activities (Lastikova, 2023). Several moderate and statistically significant associations were also identified. “Leadership prioritises peacebuilding” was positively associated with “University-led initiatives are impactful” ($\rho = 0.590$, $p < 0.001$) and “Organises seminars/workshops on peace” ($\rho = 0.518$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, “Campus encourages peaceful resolution” was significantly associated with “University is a key driver of peace” ($\rho = 0.559$, $p < 0.001$) and “Works with traditional/community leaders” ($\rho = 0.510$, $p < 0.001$). These relationships indicate that respondents who perceived stronger leadership commitment, peaceful campus practices, and community engagement also tended to report greater levels of other

peacebuilding activities (Icban, 2025; Johnson, 2019; Heleta & Deardorff, 2017).

In contrast, some relationships were weak and statistically non-significant. The weakest association was between “Leadership prioritises peacebuilding” and “Campus encourages peaceful resolution” ($\rho = 0.029$, $p = 0.860$). Leadership prioritisation was also not significantly associated with “Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions,” “University is a key driver of peace,” or “Works with traditional/community leaders.” These findings suggest that perceptions of leadership commitment do not necessarily coincide with perceptions of all other institutional peacebuilding practices (Martínez-López et al., 2022). Policy-related measures also showed fewer significant associations than participatory and collaborative activities. For example, “Policies prevent political/ethnic tensions” was significantly associated with “Works with traditional/community leaders” ($\rho = 0.596$, $p < 0.01$), but it was not significantly associated with seminars, collaboration with NGOs/CSOs, or student union activities. This pattern may indicate that respondents perceive formal institutional policies and community engagement as related dimensions of peacebuilding, while their relationship with specific operational activities is less consistent (Ojo-Lanre & Amodu, 2025).

The qualitative findings from FGDs and KIIs reveal that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Sierra Leone have a critical role in promoting sustainable peace, national cohesion, and social transformation. The findings indicate that respondents generally perceived institutional policies, leadership, and peace-related programmes as important components of peacebuilding within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Respondents reported high levels of agreement that institutional policies addressed political and ethnic tensions and that institutional leadership prioritised peacebuilding. These findings reflect respondents’ perceptions of the contribution of institutional arrangements to peacebuilding rather than demonstrating that such policies or leadership practices directly prevent conflict or cause peacebuilding outcomes. Participants emphasized the need to integrate peace education across academic programmes rather than limiting it to specialised courses. Student-centred teaching approaches, critical thinking, conflict-resolution training, and civic education were perceived as important for addressing ethnic and regional divisions and preparing students to become responsible leaders. The findings also suggest that HEIs should strengthen internal governance systems based on fairness, transparency, and inclusion. Respondents highlighted effective management structures, transparent student governance, inclusive human resource practices, mediation mechanisms, and institutional peace committees as important mechanisms for addressing campus conflicts and promoting democratic values.

Additionally, participants stressed that the sustainability of university peace initiatives depends on sustained institutional commitment, adequate funding, and stronger partnerships with government and development actors. Permanent peace centres, stronger community engagement, and the use of regional campuses as platforms for mediation and civic education were identified as potential strategies

for strengthening peacebuilding activities. Overall, HEIs were perceived as important platforms for translating peace education into broader societal engagement by preparing graduates with conflict-resolution skills and a commitment to national unity. However, these findings represent participants' perceptions and do not establish causal effects of HEI policies or programmes on broader peacebuilding outcomes.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are essential in promoting peace education, conflict prevention, reconciliation, and national cohesion in post-war Sierra Leone. Although peace education programmes have positively influenced students and are supported through curriculum integration and institutional activities, their effectiveness is limited by inadequate funding, fragmented implementation, weak partnerships, low programme visibility, and limited student awareness. Strengthening institutional commitment and collaboration is therefore necessary to maximize their peacebuilding impact. The study recommends mainstreaming peace education across all academic programmes, establishing well-funded peace centres, increasing government and institutional investment, strengthening partnerships with peacebuilding organizations, promoting experiential learning and community engagement, improving institutional governance, and implementing continuous monitoring, research, and a national policy framework to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of peace education in Sierra Leone.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, John Juana, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, Prince Tongor Mabey, and Joseph James Mbavai; methodology, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, Prince Tongor Mabey, and Joseph James Mbavai; formal analysis, John Juana, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, and Prince Tongor Mabey; investigation, John Juana, Saidu Challay, and Samuel Joseph Bebeley; resources, John Juana, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, Prince Tongor Mabey, and Joseph James Mbavai; data curation, John Juana, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, Prince Tongor Mabey, and Joseph James Mbavai; writing—original draft preparation, John Juana, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, and Prince Tongor Mabey; writing—review and editing, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, and Joseph James Mbavai; supervision, Saidu Challay, Samuel Joseph Bebeley, Prince Tongor Mabey, and Joseph James Mbavai. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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