



Research Article

Pedagogical Approaches, Implementation Factors, and Outcomes of Peace Education in Higher Education Institutions in Post-conflict Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This study examined the pedagogical approaches, implementation factors, and perceived outcomes of peace education in higher education institutions (HEIs) in post-conflict Sierra Leone. Situated within the country's enduring peacebuilding project following the 1991–2002 civil war, the study is guided by three complementary theoretical frameworks: Galtung's Positive Peace Theory, Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith's 4Rs Framework (Reconciliation, Recognition, Redistribution, and Representation), and Lederach's Sustainable Peacebuilding Model. A mixed-methods descriptive survey design was employed, drawing on structured questionnaire data from 43 academic and administrative staff respondents drawn from five HEIs University of Makeni, Eastern Technical University, Njala University, University of Sierra Leone (Fourah Bay College), and Every Nation College supplemented by qualitative data from 30 Focus Group Discussions with 240 students and 16 Key Informant Interviews with university administrators and national peacebuilding practitioners. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman rank-order correlation, while qualitative data were thematically analysed. The findings reveal that peace education is formally embedded in university curricula and that content substantially reflects local conflict dynamics (mean = 4.41; 90.2% agreement). However, pedagogical delivery remains predominantly lecture-based, with limited integration of participatory, experiential, and competency-based approaches. Assessment systems inadequately capture peace-related competencies (mean = 3.52; 61.9% agreement). Regarding implementation, political and social sensitivity arising from the civil war history constitutes the most significant barrier (mean = 3.59; 68.3%), followed by inadequate infrastructure, resource constraints, and instructional material shortages. Spearman correlations indicate that teaching materials, local curriculum relevance, monitoring frameworks, and institutional political will are closely interconnected. Peace education was perceived to produce meaningful outcomes, including fostering tolerance among diverse students (mean = 4.24; 85.7%), promoting peaceful coexistence (mean = 4.25; 85.0%), and influencing institutional policies toward inclusion (mean = 4.19; 85.7%). Correlational analysis confirms that impact dimensions are mutually reinforcing, with the strongest association between tolerance and policy influence ($p = 0.874$, $p < 0.001$). Qualitative findings substantiate these patterns while highlighting gaps in community engagement, institutional leadership commitment, and the depth of local contextualization in curricula. The study recommends transitioning peace education pedagogy from lecture-based delivery toward participatory and experiential approaches; strengthening institutional monitoring and evaluation systems; deepening curriculum contextualization around Sierra Leonean conflict history and transitional justice processes; and building structured partnerships between HEIs and national peacebuilding institutions.

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Keywords

Peace Education, Pedagogical Approaches, Higher Education Institutions, Post-Conflict, Peacebuilding, Sierra Leone, Social Cohesion

1. Introduction

Peace is not merely the absence of war or direct physical violence but rather an active, ongoing process of building structures, relationships, and values that prevent conflict from arising and enable human societies to flourish. Johan Galtung's foundational distinction between negative peace the cessation of organised violence and positive peace the construction of equitable, just, and cohesive social arrangements provides a powerful theoretical anchor for understanding why peace requires intentional cultivation through institutions, education, and governance [1, 2]. Within this framework, education occupies a uniquely dual position: it can either reinforce structural inequalities and ethnic or political divisions that give rise to conflict, or it can serve as a transformative instrument for reconciliation, coexistence, tolerance, and sustainable development [3, 4].

Global recognition of education's peacebuilding potential is explicitly codified in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which positions SDG 4 (inclusive, equitable, quality education) and SDG 16 (peaceful, just, and inclusive societies) as mutually reinforcing pillars of the development agenda [9, 10]. In November 2023, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Sustainable Development, directing all member states to systematically integrate peace-oriented values, intercultural understanding, and critical learning into national educational frameworks [11]. These international commitments reflect a growing consensus that durable peace cannot be achieved through security measures and political settlements alone, but requires the sustained cultivation of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviours conducive to non-violent coexistence.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are positioned at the apex of this educational peacebuilding enterprise. As sites where future leaders, professionals, policymakers, civil society actors, and community educators are trained, universities carry an exceptional responsibility for cultivating the knowledge, critical competencies, and ethical dispositions required for peacebuilding in diverse, post-conflict societies [5, 6]. Research on higher education in conflict-affected contexts confirms that universities can serve as platforms for promoting intergroup dialogue and contact, as training grounds for conflict resolution practitioners, as neutral spaces for national discourse, and as generators of locally contextualised peacebuilding knowledge [5, 6, 21, 24]. However, this potential is neither automatic nor guaranteed: universities can equally

reproduce horizontal inequalities, reinforce dominant narratives that exclude marginalised voices, and operate as politically captured institutions that reflect rather than challenge the structural sources of conflict [4].

The theoretical framework underpinning this study integrates three complementary conceptual architectures. First, Galtung's Positive Peace Theory provides the normative horizon of peace understood as the presence of social justice, human rights, equitable institutions, and conditions for human flourishing, not merely the silencing of armed violence [1, 2]. Second, the 4Rs Framework developed by Novelli, Lopes Cardozo, and Smith [4] offers an analytical lens for examining whether education's contribution to peacebuilding is characterised by reconciliation (addressing relational wounds of conflict), recognition (acknowledging diverse identities and epistemic traditions), redistribution (challenging structural and material inequalities), and representation (ensuring inclusive participation in educational governance and curriculum design). Third, Lederach's Sustainable Peacebuilding Model [3] emphasises that durable peace requires engagement across multiple societal levels grassroots communities, middle-range organisations such as universities, and national leadership and that educational institutions occupy a distinctive middle-range position capable of bridging local and national peacebuilding dynamics.

Sierra Leone provides a historically significant and analytically rich setting for examining peace education in higher education. The country endured an eleven-year civil war from 1991 to 2002, which left an estimated 50,000 dead, generated widespread displacement, and systematically destroyed educational infrastructure [12]. The Lomé Peace Accord of 1999 and the subsequent disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration process created the political conditions for reconstruction, while the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2002, sought to address impunity, acknowledge victims' experiences, and promote national reconciliation [12]. Education was identified by the TRC as a foundational instrument for preventing a relapse into conflict and building a culture of civic responsibility, tolerance, and democratic participation.

In the two decades since the war's end, Sierra Leone's HEIs including Fourah Bay College (the oldest university in West Africa), Njala University, the University of Makeni, and the Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone have progressively integrated peacebuilding, governance, and civic

education into their programmes. The Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC) and the ECOWAS National Early Warning Directorate have also engaged the higher education sector as a partner in sustaining peace [13, 17]. However, the evidence base on how peace education is actually implemented in Sierra Leonean HEIs including the pedagogical approaches used, the institutional and contextual factors that shape implementation, and the perceived outcomes for students and campus communities remains thin [13–15].

The existing literature, while growing, reveals significant gaps. Studies from Sierra Leone have largely focused on the school level, examining how the Emerging Issues curriculum and teacher education reform programmes address conflict-related themes [13, 16]. Research on the higher education dimension is more limited, with recent contributions examining the systemic barriers facing HEIs as catalysts for sustainable peace but stopping short of empirically investigating pedagogical practice and student-level outcomes [14, 15]. Comparative studies from other post-conflict contexts including Nepal, Somaliland, and Afghanistan confirm that HEIs face recurrent structural challenges: underfunding, political interference, and limited institutionalization of peace education curriculum, all of which mirror patterns evident in Sierra Leone [5–7].

This study addresses these gaps by empirically investigating three interconnected dimensions of peace education in five Sierra Leonean HEIs: (1) the pedagogical approaches employed in peace education delivery; (2) the institutional and contextual factors influencing the implementation of peace education programmes; and (3) the perceived outcomes of peace education for students, academic staff, and broader university communities. The study thereby contributes the first mixed-methods empirical analysis of peace education at the higher education level in Sierra Leone, generating evidence that can inform curriculum policy, institutional strategy, and the national peacebuilding agenda.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design using a mixed-methods approach to examine the pedagogical approaches, implementation factors, and outcomes of peace education in HEIs in post-conflict Sierra Leone. A phenomenological perspective guided the qualitative component, enabling in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences of peace education. Quantitative data were collected from academic and administrative staff to assess perceptions, practices, and institutional characteristics at scale, while qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews provided contextual depth, nuance, and explanatory insight into programme effectiveness and implementation dynamics. Methodological triangulation of both strands strengthened the validity, credibility, and comprehensiveness of the findings.

2.2. Study Area

The study was conducted in Sierra Leone, a post-conflict West African nation sharing borders with Guinea, Liberia, and the Atlantic Ocean. Following the devastating 1991–2002 civil war, which claimed an estimated 50,000 lives and produced hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, Sierra Leone has pursued an ambitious national peacebuilding, reconciliation, and reconstruction programme anchored in transitional justice mechanisms, international support frameworks, and the progressive strengthening of civil institutions, including higher education [12]. The study focused on five higher education institutions selected for their geographic spread across the country's major regions and their relevance to peace-related programming: Fourah Bay College/University of Sierra Leone (Western Area), Njala University (Southern Province), University of Makeni (Northern Province), Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (Eastern Province), and Every Nation College (Freetown). These institutions represent the spectrum of public and private higher education in Sierra Leone and collectively enrol the majority of the country's higher education students.

2.3. Sample and Sampling Techniques

A total of 295 respondents participated in the study: 43 academic and administrative staff who completed structured questionnaires, 240 students who participated in 30 Focus Group Discussions (8 participants per FGD, 6 FGDs per institution), and 16 Key Informants comprising university administrators, student leaders, and representatives from the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion (ICPNC) and the ECOWAS National Early Warning Directorate. The five institutions were purposively selected to ensure representation across institutional type, regional location, and programme portfolio. Within each institution, stratified sampling was used to ensure faculty, departmental, and year-of-study representation among student respondents, while simple random sampling was applied to select academic staff. Purposive sampling identified senior administrators and peacebuilding practitioners based on their knowledge and decision-making roles, while criterion sampling selected student leaders and peace club coordinators who were actively engaged in campus peacebuilding activities. This multi-stage, multi-criteria sampling strategy maximised the diversity and credibility of evidence across both quantitative and qualitative strands.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through four complementary instruments: (1) a structured questionnaire administered to academic and administrative staff, containing five-point Likert scale items aligned with the three study objectives (pedagogical approaches, implementation factors, and outcomes), as well as categorical demographic items; (2) a semi-structured

FGD guide used with student groups to explore perceptions of peace education relevance, delivery quality, and personal impact; (3) a structured KII guide used with university administrators and peacebuilding practitioners to elicit institutional-level perspectives on programme design, policy context, and systemic challenges; and (4) documentary review of institutional curricula, policy documents, and programme descriptions. FGD and KII sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Completed questionnaires were screened and cleaned prior to analysis.

2.5. Reliability and Validity

Instrument validity was enhanced through expert review of items by peace education scholars and alignment with validated measures from previous studies in comparable post-conflict contexts. The questionnaire was pre-tested with a small convenience sample before field deployment, and items were refined based on feedback. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data strengthened internal validity. External validity was supported through the deliberate inclusion of institutions from all five administrative regions of Sierra Leone and the representation of diverse institutional profiles within the sample. Reliability was ensured through standardised questionnaire administration procedures, consistent FGD and KII protocols, and inter-rater reliability review of qualitative coding.

2.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations, medians, and inter-quartile ranges) and Spearman rank-order correlation (ρ) to examine associations among Likert-scale variables. Spearman correlation was selected over Pearson's r given the ordinal nature of the data and to minimise the impact of non-normality in small sub-samples. Statistical significance was set at $p = 0.05$ (two-tailed). Qualitative data from FGDs and KIIs were thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, with transcripts coded inductively and deductively into nodes and subsequently organised into thematic categories aligned with the research objectives. Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated through triangulation in the Results and Discussion section.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection commenced. Participation was entirely voluntary; informed consent was obtained from all respondents after a full explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were

maintained by removing personal identifiers, securely storing coded and encrypted data, and reporting all findings in aggregate form. All sources were properly acknowledged in accordance with APA 7th edition referencing standards.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study across three thematic areas: (3.1) demographic characteristics of respondents, (3.2) pedagogical approaches to peace education and their interrelationships, (3.3) factors influencing the implementation of peace education, and (3.4) the outcomes of peace education on students and institutional communities. A note on sample sizes: the questionnaire was administered to 43 staff respondents; however, several items addressing specific pedagogical tools and assessment practices were answered only by respondents who confirmed direct involvement in peace education instruction ($N = 21$). Items addressing policy, curriculum mainstreaming, and institutional support were answered by the full staff sample ($N = 41$, with 2 non-responses). This differential N is preserved across tables to maintain data integrity.

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 43 academic and administrative staff respondents. The largest institutional representation came from the University of Makeni (44.19%), consistent with its status as the largest sampled campus by enrolment. Most respondents were located in the Northwest Region (34.88%), reflecting the geographic spread of sampled institutions. The sample was predominantly male (76.74%), with female respondents constituting 20.93% and one respondent not specifying gender a pattern reflecting the broader gender composition of university academic and senior administrative staff in Sierra Leone's public higher education system.

Regarding age, the most represented group was 34–41 years (27.91%), followed by 26–33 years (23.26%) and 42–49 years (20.93%), indicating a workforce in active mid-career professional engagement. Educationally, the sample was well-qualified: 39.53% held Bachelor's degrees, 37.21% Master's degrees, 16.28% PhDs, and 6.98% MPhils, collectively conferring the scholarly competence needed to evaluate and implement peace education programmes credibly. Lecturers formed the majority occupational group (55.81%), followed by Administrators (20.93%). With respect to institutional experience, 41.86% had less than five years in their current roles, while 20.93% had more than 15 years a distribution suggesting a productive mix of institutional memory and fresh perspective that enriches the study's evidentiary base.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents.

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
University/Institution	University of Makeni (UNIMAK)	19	44.19
	Eastern Technical University (ETU-SL)	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	1	2.33
	Internship Student	1	2.33
	Other	1	2.33
Years 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

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Total		43	100.00

3.2. Pedagogical Approaches to Peace Education in Higher Education Institutions

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for nine indicators of pedagogical approach and institutional support for peace education, arranged in descending order of item agreement level. Two distinct item groups are evident based on sample size: items answered by all eligible staff respondents ($N = 41$) concerning curriculum structure and policy context, and items answered by respondents directly engaged in peace education instruction ($N = 21$) concerning pedagogical methods and assessment.

The highest-rated indicator was formal curriculum integration 'Peace education formally embedded in curriculum' with a mean of 4.44 ($SD = 0.90$) and 82.9% agreement, indicating that peace education has achieved substantial mainstreaming within formal academic programmes across the sampled institutions. 'Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics' recorded the second-highest mean (4.41, $SD = 0.81$) with the highest agreement level (90.2%), suggesting that institutional efforts to contextualise peace education content around Sierra Leone's specific historical, social, and political conflict experiences have been reasonably successful. This finding is consistent with the 4Rs Framework's emphasis on recognition and reconciliation as foundational dimensions of contextually embedded peace education [4, 15].

Policy-level perceptions were also broadly positive: 'National policy supports peace education' achieved a mean of

4.12 ($SD = 1.27$) with 80.5% agreement, while 'Government provides clear implementation guidelines' scored lower (mean = 3.61, $SD = 1.34$; 65.9% agreement), suggesting a policy-to-practice translation gap in which supportive national commitments have not yet translated into consistently clear operational guidance at institutional level [50]. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks (mean = 3.80; 65.9% agreement) and political will at the institutional level (mean = 3.59; 56.1% agreement) were also moderately rated, with the latter's relatively lower agreement suggesting inter-institutional variability in the degree to which university leadership actively champions peace education as a strategic institutional priority [19, 35, 45].

Within the instructional sub-group ($N = 21$), peace-specific teaching materials scored moderately (mean = 3.81; 66.7% agreement), indicating that relevant resources exist but are not universally or sufficiently available. The persistence of traditional, lecture-based instruction ('chalk and talk' method; mean = 3.62; 71.4% agreement) suggests that didactic approaches to peace education remain prevalent; a finding of concern given the extensive evidence that participatory, dialogue-based, and experiential pedagogies are substantially more effective than lecturing in developing the attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural competencies central to peace-building [18-20]. The lowest-rated item was 'Assessments reward empathy and conflict resolution' (mean = 3.52; 61.9% agreement), revealing that current assessment systems inadequately capture the affective and behavioural learning outcomes that distinguish meaningful peace education from general civic knowledge acquisition [8, 33].

Table 2. Descriptive statistics: Pedagogical approaches to peace education.

Item	N	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Agree (4+5)%
Peace education formally embedded in curriculum	41	4.44	0.90	5.0	1.0	82.9
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	41	4.41	0.81	5.0	1.0	90.2
National policy supports peace education	41	4.12	1.27	5.0	1.0	80.5
Government provides clear implementation guidelines	41	3.61	1.34	4.0	2.0	65.9
Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks in place	41	3.80	1.31	4.0	2.0	65.9
Political will at institutional level	41	3.59	1.30	4.0	2.0	56.1
Peace-specific teaching materials available	21	3.81	1.25	4.0	2.0	66.7
Traditional 'chalk and talk' method dominates	21	3.62	1.56	4.0	3.0	71.4
Assessments reward empathy and conflict resolution	21	3.52	1.63	4.0	3.0	61.9

3.3. Spearman Correlation Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

Table 3 presents the Spearman rank-order correlation matrix for the nine pedagogical approach indicators. Several theoretically significant associations emerge. The strongest positive correlation was observed between 'Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics' and 'Peace-specific teaching materials available' ($\rho = 0.730$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that institutions which contextualise peace education around local conflict realities tend systematically to provide more specialised instructional resources in support of such content a pattern consistent with broader literature on conflict-sensitive curriculum design [38, 44].

An equally strong relationship existed between local curriculum relevance and M&E frameworks ($\rho = 0.708$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that where institutions invest in context-specific peace education, they are also more likely to maintain structured systems for monitoring and evaluating programme delivery and outcomes [37, 51]. Similarly, 'Assessments reward empathy and conflict resolution' was strongly correlated with both M&E frameworks ($\rho = 0.701$, $p < 0.001$) and available

teaching materials ($\rho = 0.674$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that outcome-oriented assessment and contextual resourcing operate in tandem as markers of institutional peace education quality. Formal curriculum embedding showed significant correlations with government guidelines ($\rho = 0.608$, $p < 0.001$) and national policy support ($\rho = 0.310$, $p = 0.048$), while political will was significantly associated with curriculum contextualisation ($\rho = 0.457$, $p = 0.003$) and institutional guidelines ($\rho = 0.585$, $p < 0.001$).

Notably, national policy support and M&E frameworks showed virtually no association ($\rho = 0.022$, $p = 0.892$), implying that the existence of supportive national policies does not automatically translate into functioning institutional monitoring systems. This policy-implementation disconnect is consistent with findings from comparable post-conflict settings in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia [40, 41]. Assessment quality (rewarding empathy) also showed no significant relationship with the availability of government guidelines ($\rho = 0.043$, $p = 0.852$), reinforcing the observation that top-down policy direction alone is an insufficient driver of meaningful pedagogical change in peace education delivery.

Table 3. Spearman correlation matrix: Pedagogical approaches to peace education.

Item A	Item B	ρ	p	Sig.
Peace education in formal curriculum	Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	0.406	0.009	**
Peace education in formal curriculum	Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	0.168	0.467	ns
Peace education in formal curriculum	Assessments reward empathy & resolution	0.232	0.311	ns
Peace education in formal curriculum	Peace-specific teaching materials	0.379	0.090	ns
Peace education in formal curriculum	National policy supports peace education	0.310	0.048	*
Peace education in formal curriculum	Government provides clear guidelines	0.608	<0.001	***
Peace education in formal curriculum	Political will at institutional level	0.331	0.035	*
Peace education in formal curriculum	M&E frameworks in place	0.209	0.189	ns
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	0.412	0.063	ns
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	Assessments reward empathy & resolution	0.415	0.061	ns
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	Peace-specific teaching materials	0.730	<0.001	***
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	National policy supports peace education	0.122	0.447	ns
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	Government provides clear guidelines	0.330	0.035	*
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	Political will at institutional level	0.457	0.003	**
Curriculum reflects local conflict dynamics	M&E frameworks in place	0.708	<0.001	***
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	Assessments reward empathy & resolution	0.599	0.004	**
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	Peace-specific teaching materials	0.389	0.082	ns
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	National policy supports peace education	0.303	0.182	ns
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	Government provides clear guidelines	0.208	0.367	ns

Item A	Item B	ρ	p	Sig.
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	Political will at institutional level	0.347	0.124	ns
Traditional 'chalk & talk' dominates	M&E frameworks in place	0.323	0.153	ns
Assessments reward empathy & resolution	Peace-specific teaching materials	0.674	0.001	***
Assessments reward empathy & resolution	National policy supports peace education	0.201	0.383	ns
Assessments reward empathy & resolution	Government provides clear guidelines	0.043	0.852	ns
Assessments reward empathy & resolution	Political will at institutional level	0.219	0.341	ns
Assessments reward empathy & resolution	M&E frameworks in place	0.701	<0.001	***
Peace-specific teaching materials	National policy supports peace education	0.393	0.078	ns
Peace-specific teaching materials	Government provides clear guidelines	0.293	0.197	ns
Peace-specific teaching materials	Political will at institutional level	0.247	0.281	ns
Peace-specific teaching materials	M&E frameworks in place	0.680	0.001	***
National policy supports peace education	Government provides clear guidelines	0.348	0.026	*
National policy supports peace education	Political will at institutional level	0.440	0.004	**
National policy supports peace education	M&E frameworks in place	0.022	0.892	ns
Government provides clear guidelines	Political will at institutional level	0.585	<0.001	***
Government provides clear guidelines	M&E frameworks in place	0.198	0.214	ns
Political will at institutional level	M&E frameworks in place	0.242	0.127	ns

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant ($p \geq 0.05$). ρ = Spearman's rho.

The qualitative data elaborated and extended these quantitative findings substantially. Focus group and interview participants described a persistent orientation of peace education curricula toward international theoretical frameworks and global case studies particularly Western examples of post-conflict reconstruction at the expense of rigorous engagement with Sierra Leone's own civil war history, the Lomé Peace Accord, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and community-based reconciliation initiatives such as Fam-bul Tok. This imbalance, as participants noted, reduces students' capacity to apply theoretical peace education knowledge to the specific sociocultural dynamics of their communities and reduces the personal relevance and emotional resonance of the curriculum.

Despite the prevalence of lecture-based delivery, participants identified several encouraging instances of experiential and participatory learning, particularly in institutions receiving external partnership support. Community-based research projects, peer mediation workshops, campus dialogue forums, role-play exercises, and peace club activities were cited as providing students with opportunities to apply conflict resolution skills in real-life situations. These approaches described by students as substantially more transformative and practically valuable than traditional examinations align closely with the constructivist and participatory pedagogy traditions in peace education scholarship [18, 20, 22].

3.4. Factors Influencing the Implementation of Peace Education

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for nine identified barriers to peace education implementation, ranked by severity. Most barriers were perceived as 'moderate' rather than 'major' obstacles, suggesting that while meaningful implementation challenges exist, institutional actors do not regard them as insurmountable. The most severe barrier was 'Political/social sensitivity (civil war history)' (mean = 3.59, SD = 1.45; 68.3% agreement), indicating that the legacy of the 1991–2002 conflict continues to create institutional caution in handling peace-related themes that intersect with contested political and social narratives particularly issues of accountability, perpetrator identity, and post-war justice [13, 43].

Among institutional barriers, inadequate infrastructure (mean = 3.19, SD = 1.63; 52.4% agreement) and resource constraints/insufficient budgetary support (mean = 3.10, SD = 1.58; 57.1% agreement) ranked second and third, respectively. The high standard deviation for the infrastructure item (1.63) reflects considerable inter-institutional variation: while some institutions may possess adequate facilities, others experience acute deficiencies in classrooms, technology, and learning spaces required for participatory and experiential peace education activities [34, 42]. Inadequate teaching materials

constituted a moderate barrier (mean = 3.00; 47.6% agreement), consistent with the earlier finding that contextualised peace education resources are unevenly distributed across institutions [44, 54].

Social and political sensitivity arising from existing grievances (mean = 2.95; 42.9% agreement) and institutional divisions or departmental silos (mean = 2.86; 38.1% agreement) were perceived as minor barriers. Poor sensitisation and awareness (mean = 2.76; 42.9% agreement) and inadequate

trained human capacity (mean = 2.62; 38.1% agreement) were also minor barriers, suggesting that while capacity and awareness issues exist, they do not yet constitute primary obstacles to programme delivery. The least severe barrier was 'Limited leadership priority for peace education' (mean = 2.19; 19.0% agreement), indicating that institutional leaders are broadly perceived as supportive of peacebuilding initiatives, consistent with findings from studies of post-conflict higher education in comparable contexts [35, 36, 39, 45].

Table 4. Descriptive statistics: Factors influencing the implementation of peace education.

Item	N	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Agree (4+5)%	Severity
Political/social sensitivity (civil war history)	41	3.59	1.45	4.0	2.0	68.3	Moderate
Inadequate infrastructure	21	3.19	1.63	4.0	4.0	52.4	Moderate
Resource constraints (insufficient budget)	21	3.10	1.58	4.0	3.0	57.1	Moderate
Inadequate teaching materials	21	3.00	1.45	3.0	2.0	47.6	Moderate
Political/social sensitivity (existing grievances)	21	2.95	1.60	3.0	3.0	42.9	Minor
Institutional divisions/departmental silos	21	2.86	1.42	3.0	2.0	38.1	Minor
Poor sensitisation and awareness	21	2.76	1.58	3.0	3.0	42.9	Minor
Inadequate trained human capacity	21	2.62	1.50	3.0	3.0	38.1	Minor
Limited leadership priority for peace education	21	2.19	1.29	2.0	2.0	19.0	Minor

3.5. Spearman Correlation Analysis of Implementation Factors

Table 5 presents the Spearman correlation matrix for the nine implementation barriers. The strongest associations illuminate the interconnected nature of institutional and contextual challenges. The most striking finding was the strong positive correlation between 'Inadequate teaching materials' and 'Political sensitivity (existing grievances)' ($\rho = 0.850$, $p < 0.001$) and between 'Inadequate teaching materials' and 'Institutional divisions/silos' ($\rho = 0.825$, $p < 0.001$). These relationships suggest that in institutions where existing political and social grievances make the development and distribution of peace education resources politically sensitive, institutional fragmentation further compounds the material deficit [34, 43]. Similarly, the strong association between institutional silos and political sensitivity concerning grievances ($\rho = 0.830$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that structural fragmentation and unresolved social tensions tend to co-occur as mutually reinforcing barriers.

'Political sensitivity (war history)' was strongly correlated with 'Resource constraints' ($\rho = 0.717$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting

that institutions operating in environments where civil war history is treated as politically sensitive also tend to experience inadequate funding possibly reflecting institutional reluctance to allocate resources to programmes addressing potentially contested content [42, 43]. Leadership priority was significantly associated with both institutional silos ($\rho = 0.539$, $p = 0.012$) and poor awareness ($\rho = 0.457$, $p = 0.037$), confirming that when university management does not actively prioritise peace education, awareness efforts weaken and internal coordination fractures, as predicted by institutional leadership theory [35, 45].

In contrast, several barrier pairs showed non-significant relationships, indicating that they function as independent challenges. 'Inadequate trained human capacity' and 'Inadequate infrastructure' showed virtually no association ($\rho = 0.040$, $p = 0.863$), confirming that human resource gaps and physical facility deficits are distinct institutional problems requiring targeted and separate interventions. Likewise, the two forms of political sensitivity war history and existing grievances were not significantly correlated ($\rho = 0.049$, $p = 0.833$), suggesting that participants distinguish analytically between historical conflict legacies and contemporary political tensions as separate sources of institutional caution [43, 46].

Table 5. Spearman correlation matrix: Factors influencing the implementation of peace education.

Item A	Item B	ρ	p	Sig.
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Resource constraints (budget)	0.717	<0.001	***
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Inadequate trained human capacity	0.090	0.700	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Inadequate teaching materials	0.154	0.506	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Limited leadership priority	0.297	0.192	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Institutional divisions/silos	0.099	0.669	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Inadequate infrastructure	-0.233	0.311	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Poor sensitisation/awareness	0.177	0.443	ns
Political/social sensitivity (war history)	Political sensitivity (grievances)	0.049	0.833	ns
Resource constraints (budget)	Limited leadership priority	0.464	0.034	*
Inadequate teaching materials	Institutional divisions/silos	0.825	<0.001	***
Inadequate teaching materials	Inadequate infrastructure	0.438	0.047	*
Inadequate teaching materials	Political sensitivity (grievances)	0.850	<0.001	***
Limited leadership priority	Institutional divisions/silos	0.539	0.012	*
Limited leadership priority	Poor sensitisation/awareness	0.457	0.037	*
Institutional divisions/silos	Poor sensitisation/awareness	0.437	0.047	*
Institutional divisions/silos	Political sensitivity (grievances)	0.830	<0.001	***
Inadequate trained human capacity	Inadequate infrastructure	0.040	0.863	ns
Political sensitivity (war history)	Political sensitivity (grievances)	0.049	0.833	ns

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ns = not significant ($p \geq 0.05$). Selected significant and theoretically notable pairs shown. ρ = Spearman's rho.

Qualitative findings added important contextual texture to these patterns. Participants consistently reported that inadequate funding, material shortages, and political sensitivities surrounding conflict-related content combine to create a climate of institutional caution that limits the scope and ambition of peace education programmes. Universities were often reluctant to develop or distribute standardised peace education materials addressing sensitive historical and political issues such as civil war atrocities, perpetrator accountability, or ethnic and regional dimensions of the conflict a sensitivity that mirrors patterns observed in other post-conflict African and Asian higher education contexts [7, 13].

The study also documented a significant gap between classroom instruction and community-based engagement. Although a subset of students particularly from Njala University's community-facing programmes participated in community peacebuilding projects, the majority reported limited or no structured opportunities to apply peace education learning beyond the classroom. This selective participation confines much peace education to theoretical instruction and undermines the experiential learning cycle central to the development of genuine peacebuilding competencies [4, 22].

Participants additionally noted that when institutional leadership does not actively champion peace education, departments operate in isolation, campus-wide sensitisation activities are curtailed, and the programme's broader institutional impact is substantially diminished.

3.6. Impact of Peace Education on Students and Communities

Table 6 presents descriptive statistics for five perceived impact dimensions of peace education on students and the institutional community. All indicators recorded mean scores above 3.83 and agreement levels exceeding 73%, indicating a broadly positive assessment of peace education's outcomes across all sampled institutions.

The highest-rated impact was 'Clarified the importance of peaceful co-existence' (mean = 4.25, SD = 1.02; 85.0% agreement), suggesting that peace education has been particularly effective in deepening students' and staff's understanding of why peaceful, harmonious living across differences is essential for personal and social wellbeing a core objective of positive peace education [1, 18, 52]. Closely related, 'Fostered

tolerance among students from diverse backgrounds' recorded a mean of 4.24 (SD = 1.00; 85.7% agreement), confirming that peace education contributes meaningfully to intercultural understanding and the reduction of prejudice among students from heterogeneous ethnic, regional, and religious backgrounds [31, 32]. 'Influenced institutional policies toward inclusion' (mean = 4.19; 85.7% agreement) suggests that peace education has catalysed broader institutional cultural and policy change, shifting university communities toward more equitable and inclusive practices an outcome consistent with the 4Rs Framework's emphasis on representation and redistribution [4, 23].

'Contributed to unity within the university community'

(mean = 4.05; 76.2% agreement) indicates that peace education has strengthened social cohesion within academic environments, fostering more cooperative relationships among students, staff, and administrators. The lowest-rated impact was 'Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups' (mean = 3.83; 73.2% agreement), which nevertheless remains positive. The higher standard deviation (SD = 1.46) for this item the greatest of the five indicates the most divergent perceptions, possibly reflecting inter-institutional variations in the degree to which gender equity, regional diversity, and disability inclusion are actively addressed within peace education programmes [29, 30, 47].

Table 6. Descriptive statistics: Impact of peace education on students and communities.

Item	N	Mean	SD	Median	IQR	Agree (4+5)%
Clarified the importance of peaceful co-existence	20	4.25	1.02	4.5	1.0	85.0
Fostered tolerance among students from diverse backgrounds	21	4.24	1.00	4.0	1.0	85.7
Influenced institutional policies toward inclusion	21	4.19	1.08	4.0	1.0	85.7
Contributed to unity within the university community	21	4.05	1.12	4.0	1.0	76.2
Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups	41	3.83	1.46	4.0	2.0	73.2

3.7. Spearman Correlation Analysis of Impact Dimensions

Table 7 presents the Spearman correlation matrix for the five impact dimensions. All ten pairwise correlations were statistically significant, confirming that the perceived outcomes of peace education are mutually reinforcing when one dimension of impact is strongly manifest, the others tend to co-occur. This interdependence suggests that peace education's impact operates through a holistic, self-amplifying process consistent with Lederach's integrated peacebuilding model, in which improvements in relational trust, institutional practice, and social cohesion each reinforce the others [3, 53].

The strongest correlation was between 'Fostered tolerance among diverse students' and 'Influenced institutional policies' ($\rho = 0.874$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the cultivation of tolerance at the individual level is closely associated with positive institutional-level change [25]. This relationship validates Novelli et al.'s [4] contention that sustainable peace education

must work simultaneously at both the individual attitude level and the institutional structural level, as changes in one domain reinforce and enable changes in the other [26]. 'Fostered tolerance' was also strongly associated with 'Clarified peaceful co-existence importance' ($\rho = 0.810$, $p < 0.001$), and 'Influenced policies' was similarly linked to 'Clarified peaceful co-existence' ($\rho = 0.809$, $p < 0.001$), forming a tightly interconnected cluster of the three highest-rated impact dimensions [27].

The associations involving 'Contributed to unity' and 'Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups' were significant but somewhat weaker ($\rho = 0.572$ – 0.750), consistent with the observation that unity within a university community may not automatically translate into the deeper structural change required to meaningfully include historically marginalised groups [28, 30]. This finding reinforces the 4Rs Framework's point that redistribution and representation addressing material inequalities and ensuring inclusive voice in institutional governance require deliberate, sustained commitments beyond goodwill and tolerance-building alone [4, 48–50].

Table 7. Spearman correlation matrix: Impact of peace education on students and communities.

Item A	Item B	ρ	p	Sig.
Fostered tolerance among diverse students	Influenced institutional policies	0.874	<0.001	***

Item A	Item B	ρ	p	Sig.
Fostered tolerance among diverse students	Clarified peaceful co-existence importance	0.810	<0.001	***
Fostered tolerance among diverse students	Contributed to unity within university	0.749	<0.001	***
Fostered tolerance among diverse students	Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups	0.749	<0.001	***
Influenced institutional policies	Clarified peaceful co-existence importance	0.809	<0.001	***
Influenced institutional policies	Contributed to unity within university	0.750	<0.001	***
Influenced institutional policies	Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups	0.749	<0.001	***
Clarified peaceful co-existence importance	Contributed to unity within university	0.588	0.006	**
Clarified peaceful co-existence importance	Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups	0.680	0.001	***
Contributed to unity within university	Promoted inclusion of marginalised groups	0.572	0.007	**

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. All correlations statistically significant. ρ = Spearman's rho.

The qualitative findings enriched these quantitative patterns by documenting specific transformative processes at work within campus communities. Participants described how peace education had contributed to a measurable reduction in student militancy, politically motivated campus confrontations, and ethnic and regional group conflicts that had been prevalent in some institutions during the immediate post-war period. As students encountered dialogue, role-play, and conflict resolution experiences within peace education programmes, they increasingly adopted non-violent approaches to campus disputes, and university administrators reported a corresponding shift in institutional culture from reactive crisis management to proactive policy engagement with questions of equity, inclusion, and student welfare.

Social cohesion gains were most pronounced in breaking down ethnic, regional, and political divisions that had historically fragmented student bodies, particularly in institutions drawing from diverse conflict-affected areas. Participants noted that greater tolerance encouraged broader participation of women, students from minority ethnic groups, and students from geographically marginalised districts in leadership positions and campus activities. However, respondents consistently emphasised that sustaining these gains requires institutional commitment that extends beyond programme delivery to encompass dedicated policy frameworks, adequate resourcing, and ongoing community engagement dimensions that the present study's findings confirm remain uneven across institutions.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that peace education has successfully taken root within Sierra Leonean higher education institutions through locally contextualized curricula, yet its transformative impact is limited by a critical gap between intentional design and passive, lecture-based teaching methods. While political sensitivities surrounding the nation's civil war

history, coupled with scarce resources and institutional fragmentation, create significant implementation hurdles, the programs consistently generate positive systemic outcomes by fostering campus tolerance, social cohesion, and inclusive policy reform. To bridge the disconnect between theory and practice, sustained investment is required to upgrade pedagogical methods, build facilitation capacity, and ensure these peacebuilding benefits reach marginalized groups equitably.

Based on these findings, the study advances the following recommendations. HEIs should transition peace education pedagogy from predominantly lecture-based delivery toward participatory, experiential, and community-engaged approaches, including peer mediation, structured dialogue, simulations, community research, and service learning that develop the relational and practical competencies required for real-world peacebuilding. Universities should deepen curriculum contextualisation by engaging systematically with Sierra Leone's civil war history, the Lomé Peace Accord, the TRC process, and ongoing national cohesion challenges, ensuring that students can connect theoretical frameworks to their own sociocultural and political reality. Assessment reform is urgently needed to capture affective, attitudinal, and relational learning outcomes alongside knowledge-based performance. HEIs should strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation frameworks for peace education programmes to enable evidence-based improvement and demonstrate outcomes to funders and policymakers. Sierra Leone's Ministry of Higher Education should develop clear, operationally specific implementation guidelines for peace education in HEIs, translating the existing supportive policy environment into concrete institutional mandates. Finally, HEIs should cultivate structured, sustained partnerships with national peacebuilding institutions particularly the ICPNC and the ECOWAS National Early Warning Directorate to bridge campus-based peace education and national peacebuilding practice.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges three principal limitations. First, the sample of 43 academic and administrative staff respondents, while appropriate for a mixed-methods study of five higher education institutions, may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives within each institution, particularly among part-time and visiting faculty who engage with peace education content. Future studies should aim for larger staff samples. Second, the differential item response rates ($N = 41$ for institutional/policy items; $N = 21$ for pedagogical/assessment items) reflect the targeted nature of some questions to those directly teaching peace education; however, this limits cross-item comparability and the statistical power of correlations within the smaller sub-sample. Third, the study's cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish causal relationships between pedagogical approaches and peace outcomes. Longitudinal studies tracking students' peacebuilding attitudes and behaviours before and after peace education programme exposure would strengthen causal inference.

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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