

Case Study:

**The Implementation of the 1993 Higher Education Reforms in
Cameroon: Issues and Promises**

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This paper was commissioned as support for the book
TRANSFORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Global Pressures and Local Realities in South Africa

It has particular relevance for
Section 1: The Transformation Context

*The views and opinions are those of the author and do not reflect the
views of either the Editorial Group or the CHET Board.*

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Introduction

During the period from independence in 1960 to the 1990s, the Cameroonian higher education system like those of many other developing countries was heavily burdened by its inability to adequately adapt to changing needs. The situation was further compounded by the general problems plaguing higher education systems all over the world, namely, growth of student enrolments, and retrenchment in public financing policy. The 1993 policy reforms were aimed at solving the problems by implementing far reaching innovations in the higher education system.

Analysts and multilateral partners have persistently emphasised that higher education systems in developing countries are today facing challenges of innovation and reinvigoration¹. This call appeals to governments and other stakeholders to mobilise human and material resources to support the development of the architecture of a 'rational system of higher education and orchestrate its smooth operation in a manner that promotes both mass education and excellence.'². In Cameroon, reform efforts were accordingly built on particular circumstances or problems which were a factor of its historical and cultural background. I will argue in this paper that a comprehensive implementation of the reforms might also include substantial changes in the steering approach so far adopted by the government in higher education. This in itself could be considered as one of the main factors that might guarantee the sustainability of the achievements of the reforms.

Problems of Higher Education in Cameroon

The influence of the French presence in the country led to the adoption of the binary system of traditional universities and *grandes écoles* or specialised institutions. This system was meant to serve both the English-speaking and French-Speaking Cameroonians. Hence by 1993 there was just one university in the country, the University of Yaounde (a bilingual university). Attempts were made in the 1970s to solve the problem of fast growing student enrolment and to reduce teacher-student ratios by creating university centres in Dschang, Ngaoundere, Douala and Buea. The problem of overcrowding was yet not solved and by 1984 enrolment stood at about 18000. In 1990 it rose to 32000 and to 45000 in 1991³. Corresponding growth in human and material resources did not follow. Entrance into the university centres and specialised institutions was very competitive and based on the actual openings in the public service for recruits. This implies that enrolling in any of the university centres or to any of the specialised institution was a guarantee for a well paid government job. For this reason the state could not create free entry into these schools even if the infrastructure still had room for more students. Furthermore, the programmes offered in these university centres were limited in scope and could not attract a majority of students from the upper secondary schools. The facilities created to host the various university centres were highly underused. The university centre in Buea, for example, could accommodate 2000 students, yet there were only 60 effectively studying there. These factors resulted in the following problems:

¹ Neave, G., & Van Vught, F., (1994) *Government and Higher Education Relationships Across Three Continents. The Winds of Change. Issues in Higher Education*, IAU Pergamon

² UNESCO/World Bank (2000) *Higher Education in Developing Countries. Perils and Promises: Task Force on Higher Education and Society*, IBRD/World Bank, Washington D.C.

³ *The University of Buea Strategic Plan, 1998-2003* Pressbook Limbe, 1998.

- Bilingualism as a language policy in the university was not effective since teaching was carried out predominantly in French thereby creating a situation of imbalance between the two languages. The English-speaking students increasingly felt marginalised because this situation also caused them to register very high rates of failure in examinations;
- The dramatic growth in student enrolment from 7000 in 1970 to 45000 in 1991 was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in infrastructure (indicated above). This naturally resulted in overcrowded lecture halls and other facilities. Under such conditions the teaching and learning process was bound to be very ineffective;
- Staff recruitment was far less than the growth in student enrolment so the staff-student ratio was high. This also rendered teaching and the supervision of student research very difficult;
- Laboratory equipment was grossly insufficient for the number of students enrolled for such courses. This either resulted in students shifting to other faculties or ineffectiveness in the teaching and learning process;
- Quite apart from the fact that the existing library facility was inadequate for the number of students, a new library building, which was constructed, remained unequipped for decades. Outdated books were never replaced and rendered the rate of acquisition insufficient as per the demand for books.

These factors affected both the motivation and possibilities of the students and therefore resulting in low academic performance. Success rate in annual examinations stood at 30%. This high rate of failure of 70% further justified high dropout rates. Budgetary allocation was also a very serious problem. About 46.3% of the expenditure was for personnel, 43.3% on student stipends, 8.9% on recurrent expenditure and only 1.5% on research and laboratory facilities. The curricula designed in the 1960s were inadequate in the 1990s for the demand of the expanding private sector, market forces and the increasing tendency of the government towards retrenchment by down sizing public service man power. The number of unemployed graduates was growing in the society. This was mostly due to the fact that the skills acquired in the university were highly inadequate for the requirements of the labour market. The general picture of the university community in Cameroon was that of a demoralised and demotivated academic and non-academic staff. A number of factors could account for such circumstances, namely: the absence of a clearly defined career profile for academic staff; the prevalence of teaching overloads and poor teaching conditions; the absence of clear-cut and objective criteria for promotion based on merit; the lack of research facilities and study leave opportunities. Under these circumstances higher education in Cameroon was then viewed to be sick and needed some revitalisation and overhaul.

Reform Efforts

Decree No. 92/74 of 13th April 1992 complemented by decree No. 93/034 of 19th January 1993 created five new universities all over the national territory. These were: the University of Yaounde Two, University of Douala, University of Dschang,

University of Ngaoundere, university of Buea. In addition to the existing Yaounde University, which was thereafter to be known as Yaounde University One, this made up six universities in the country as a whole. The aim of the reform among other things was stated to be to broaden the participation of different stakeholders in the financing and management of higher education institutions through the institution of tuition fees and eventual constriction of state funding. This was operationalised in the following mission goals:

- to provide universities with more academic and management autonomy;
- to provide all Cameroonians the opportunity to obtain university education;
- to expand and increase higher education opportunities and make university programs more professional and more responsive to the market forces;
- to make universities more accessible to local, regional, national and international communities; to decongest the overcrowded Yaounde University by raising university centres to the status of full-fledged universities with specific mission geared towards an overall national development perspective;
- to make rational optimal use of infrastructure, facilities and services; to revive and maximise inter-university and international co-operation.

Outcome of Reforms

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in collaboration with the World Bank, commissioned the Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE) to carry out a study entitled, *“Reforming a National System of Higher Education: The Case of Cameroon”*⁴. Their findings exposed the strength, weaknesses, as well as opportunities of the reforms. According to this study, the major challenges of the reforms saw some quantitative success, but the weaknesses threaten to reverse the situation to its state before 1993. However, it is generally believed that proper implementation of the reforms may permit the system to retain its successes.

The challenge of access was implemented in the reforms by way of the creation of the six universities (as mentioned above). This was meant to address the problem of regional distribution of study opportunities. According to the study 50% of the students registered at the University of Ngaoundere in 1995/96 for instance, came from the region and only 3% in the University of Yaounde. Meanwhile before the reforms, up to 4% of the students in the University of Yaounde (the only university at that time) came from that region (Adamawa, North and Far North provinces). Another relief brought by the reforms was the provision of the opportunity for the English-speaking Cameroonians to study in a university with English as language of instruction. The University of Yaounde was initially established in 1962 to be a bilingual university with English and French as languages of communication. But, for the over thirty years of its existence, French dominated both the curriculum content

⁴ ADEA/WGHE, (1999) *Reforming a National System of Higher Education: The Case of Cameroon*, ADEA/World Bank, Washington D.C. This report can also be available at <http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/wche/index.html>

and its delivery. The reforms gave the ‘Anglophones’ an opportunity to take courses entirely in English for the first time. Generally the entire landscape of enrolment shows a redistribution of the student population into the regions demarcated by the reforms. *Table 1* below shows developments in enrolments since 1986 and in the six universities.

Table 1: Student enrolments in Cameroon universities: 1986-1995

	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Yaounde one	17535	19893	22298	26744	34868	37215	25169	16455	17553	17524
Yaounde Two							15247	9110	7741	5631
Buea					58	65	790	2048	3286	4093
Ngaoundere					364	306	566	826	1286	1369
Dschang					555	665	1299	1647	2147	3554
Douala					645	900	1199	3654	6238	7149
Total					36490	39151	44270	33740	38251	39320

Source: ADEA Working Group on Higher Education (1999, 3)

Before the reforms it was self-evident that a dramatic rise in student enrolment without concomitant increase in human and material resources would be at the cost of quality. This explains why one of the aims of decentralisation of higher education institutions was to reduce teacher-student ratio. The WGHE study showed that the overall ratio improved from 1/54 in 1992/93 to 1/34 in 1995/96. In the various institutions ratios registered in the same academic year were as follows: University of Buea 1/34, University of Douala 1/45, University of Dschang 1/19, University of Ngaoundere 1/15, and University of Yaounde Two 1/29.

Internal and external effectiveness was one of the main problems addressed by the reforms. As has been stated above, student success rates stood at just 30% by 1992 in the University of Yaounde. This internal ineffectiveness was substantially ameliorated by the reforms. By the 1995/96 academic year, average student success rates in the University of Buea was 70%, University of Dschang 48%, and University of Yaounde one 48%. One of the required actions in the institutions included liaising with professional networks to tailor programmes according to job market needs. In this way external effectiveness of the institutions would be guaranteed.

Financial and managerial autonomy was one of the main challenges of the reforms. In order to increase the capacity of the various universities in these domains, a number of measures were taken. Firstly, administrative structures of universities were revised with the aim of providing viable self sustaining management teams to steer

the universities through their new status. Secondly student bursaries were abolished and registration fees of 50,000 CFA Frs (about \$ 830) introduced. In this way expenditure on student welfare was drastically reduced and registration fees covered about 30% of the budgets of the universities.

The Weaknesses of the Reforms

A superficial look at the quantitative effects of the reforms could lead to an oversimplification of the situation of the higher education system in the country. A closer look at the trends and developments in the system can depict a completely different picture. The University of Buea for example is forced by lack of facilities to adopt a strict cut-off policy in its admission requirements. Such a policy still eliminates a substantial number of qualified English-speaking Cameroonians from taking advantage of the institution. Meanwhile the other universities have a completely open door policy. Though in the University of Buea about 47% of the students are female, there is still a tendency of imbalance in some science programmes. This indicates that the English speaking population is gradually still being forced to register in the French language dominated universities with the same implications for their rates of success. Cameroonians in general, irrespective of region, do not fully enjoy the intended freedom of an alternative higher education system. The University of Buea therefore needs an effective proactive mechanism of planning to halt the negative impact of the situation.

Increase in the number of graduates from upper secondary has remained extremely high. Government equally encourages it by the creation of institutions in regions that are short of them. Actual openings in state universities do not meet the number of qualified high school graduates or adults seeking further professionalisation through continuing education. Intermediate groups like religious bodies and entrepreneurs have got involved in the provision of higher education. Some of these institutions include the Central African Catholic University in Yaounde, the International University in Bamenda, SAMBA Superieur in Yaounde, SIANTO Superieur in Yaounde, National Polytechnique in Bambui near Bamenda, FONAB Polytechnique in Bamenda and many others fast emerging. The development of these institutions is simply the result of social pressure. It has remained a problem for the state bureaucracy to enact a detailed policy for the regulation of the institutions to ensure quality and equity. In his report at the UNESCO world conference on higher education in Paris in 1998 the Minister of Higher Education also declared that it is government's intention to encourage entrepreneurial spirit in the higher education sub-sector⁵.

Creating six universities and diversifying programmes obviously required more human and material resources and a mechanism for their sustenance. The WGHE study revealed that gross mismanagement was noticed in most of the universities. This phenomenon resulted from a lack of adequate management skills and well defined policy instruments. Reform objectives were difficult to achieve especially in the above mentioned circumstances for a number of reasons, namely: state financing was not regular because of plausible economic constraints. Consequently there was

⁵ Mebara, J.A., Conference Mondiale Sur l' Enseignement Suprieur, *L' Enseignement Superieur au 21eme siecle, Vision et Action* (1998) Cameroon , vol. 5- Pleniere, UNESCO Paris. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/education/educprog/wche/index.html>

a need to turn to donors and other stakeholders for financial support. Considering the lack of transparency there was a situation of information asymmetry. This implies that there is no guarantee on the part of the donors or stakeholders that resources invested in the university will be well utilised. Financial reforms have been viewed by most institutions as one of the disabling factors in the implementation of the reforms. The WGHE study showed that the income of institutions fell by 80% between 1986/87 and 1992/93 while student enrolment increased by factor of 22 (e.g. from 40 to 890).

Academic capacity building is probably one of the aspects of attention in the reforms. There was a need to recruit academics to fill the positions opened in the new courses and universities. The study revealed that a majority of teachers recruited as assistant lecturers lacked research training and did not in most cases have terminal degrees (e.g. Ph.D). At the University of Younde One, they constituted 24% of the teaching staff, 47% in the University Yaounde Two, 69% in the University of Buea, 64% in the University of Ngaoundere and 72% in University of Dschang. This situation is not on an upward move toward improvement because there are not enough senior academics to provide support to these assistant lecturers for research training or postgraduate programmes.

The WGHE identified six shortcomings of the reforms:

- the lack of sensitisation of the university bureaucracy at the right moment;
- lack of specific policy instruments such as performance indicators and continuous evaluation;
- irregular funding;
- insufficient liberalisation of revenue generation;
- lack of professionally trained university administrators;
- lack of accountability and transparent management.

Three key areas of the reforms could result in substantial changes in financing and governance structures of the higher education system. Firstly, by creating the University of Buea, and by virtue of the mission assigned to it, it could be inferred that there is the political will to adopt an alternative higher education model in the country (i.e. the Anglo-Saxon system). This implies that the Anglo-American model through the University of Buea will complement the existing French model. Since the problem of the system has always been attributed to the inability to shift from *policy transfer* to *policy learning*, the reform might provide an opportunity for a more consensual decision-making. This is because the contributions from local technocrats are far greater than what was available in the 1960s when higher education was introduced in the country.

Secondly, the involvement of the other external stakeholders in financing and management of institutions introduces some forms of privatisation in the higher education system. The implication of this is that the role of the Ministry of Higher Education might have to change from that of an active controller to a supervisor who simply defines the rules of the game and assesses its results. Even the participation of community and industry in the financing of state higher education institutions could also be considered as a form of privatisation. The system might have to establish an intermediate body that will provide a link between state financing and private higher

education institutions and stakeholders. Since the scope of the stake of institutions of higher education has been broadened, the state might have to meet its obligations toward its citizens without sacrificing the survival of universities. One of the options in this situation might be that the state will finance students rather than institutions directly since students in the private universities are also state children.

Thirdly, managerial and academic capacity building needs reasonable dedication of resources in both planning and implementation. One of the factors that might have contributed to mismanagement of higher education institutions is that there are no policy instruments that state the operational benefits of good management for the institutions and for the managers themselves. Performance indicators are one of the most widely used devices for this purpose⁶. If mismanagement was actually because of lack of managerial skills, then there is the necessity to appeal for external support in building up good managerial skills and traditions in the higher education institutions. This however depends on the degree to which the 'informational asymmetry' has been dealt with⁷. The dispelling of the fear of opportunism could be by way of the introduction of strategic planning in all institutions, so that the goals of management should clearly articulated and operationalised. This is equally going to provide ample possibility for both internal and external evaluation of the programmes and institutions.

Conclusion

The 1993 higher education reforms in Cameroon were a welcome initiative and have had a significant effect on the improvement quality and access in the higher education system. However a superficial quantitative assessment of the achievements of the reforms may easily lead to an oversimplification of the present predicaments of the system. Decision-makers may have to take a closer look in order to identify proactive measures that can avoid a reversion to the situation before the reforms. Such a close observation may also include ensuring a proper implementation of the rationality behind the reforms. An ideological shift or substantial changes may be applied in the dominant steering approach of higher education from the Continental European⁸ system to a more contextual and adaptive model.

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⁶ Brennan, J. & Shah, T., (2000) *Quality Assessment and Institutional Change: Experiences from 14 countries*, Higher Education 40, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

⁷ Milgrom, P. & Robert, J., (1992) *Economics, Organisation and Management*, Prentice-Hall International Inc.

⁸ Clark, B.R., (1983) *The Higher Education System*, Berkeley: University of California Press.