

Perspectives on the evolution of African higher education: preliminary findings from an exploratory pilot study of the Cameroonian higher education system

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher learning in Africa have undergone various developments in the past half century. These developments have considerably influenced the provision of higher education by public institutions and the subsequent educational outcomes at the institutional, as well as the social level. This paper provides preliminary results of an exploratory pilot study of the Cameroonian higher education system from independence to date. Particular emphasis is put on the key historical developments and policies that explain why higher education institutions in Cameroon have not been able to adequately serve their citizens and fully use their position to impact the Cameroonian economy. This pilot study involved three phone interviews and documentary analysis. Preliminary findings suggest that a full scale study could significantly contribute to a broader understanding of the problems Africans are facing in this sector. Such a study would yield valuable policy recommendations for the Cameroonian policymakers, and important insights for institutions of higher learning throughout the continent.

Introduction

Background of issue

Institutions of higher learning in Africa have undergone various developments in the past half century. These developments have considerably influenced the provision of higher education by public institutions and the subsequent educational outcomes at the institutional, as well as the social level. Understanding the key historical developments and policies that explain why higher education institutions in Africa have not been able to adequately serve their citizens and fully integrate the knowledge economy is crucial for future policy formulation. The key turning points of the evolution of higher education in Africa (Sawyerr, 2004, Assie Lumumba, 2006; Majavu, 2009) are:

- the 1960s, which represent the independence years of most African countries. During these years most African countries established flagship universities and heavily supported both the system and their students
- the late 1970s-1980s during which economic liberalization occurred pushing international lending institutions such as the World Bank and IMF to advise developing countries to reduce government spending. One of the sectors that was most affected by those cuts was higher education
- the 2000s marked by a renewed focus on higher education institutions in Africa.

Following the World Bank commissioned report *Higher Education in Developing*

Countries: Peril and Promise. Various donor institutions started to regain some interest in the role of higher education for development.

According to Cloete et al. (2006), since 1970, student populations in institutions of higher learning in Africa have grown from about 200,000 to over four million in 2007, and at an average 8 % annual growth rate (twice the global average). 27,000 articles are published from the continent per annum (ibid.). Africa's research output has declined by over 30% from its peak in the late 1980s to less than 1% of total global research output at the start of this decade (ibid.). These figures suggest an alarming state of the higher education sector in Africa. An African continent that does not try to harness its higher education systems to tackle development issues seems to be headed in an undisputable downward path. Thus, a real transformation needs to occur. However, the first step to addressing any of the current challenges is learning from the mistakes and successes of the past, considering context. That is the purpose of this exploratory pilot study.

Overall aims of study

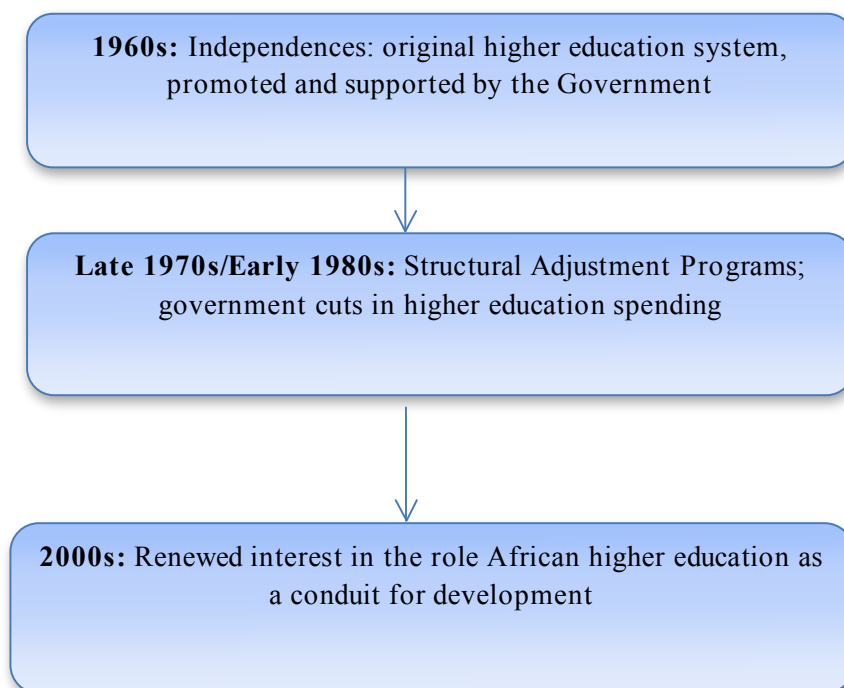
This exploratory study aimed to understand the evolution of the Cameroonian higher education system from independence to date. Particular emphasis is put on the key historical developments and policies that explain why higher education institutions in Cameroon have not been able to adequately serve their citizens and fully use their position to impact the Cameroonian economy. Such an exploration, we hope, will yield meaningful perspectives that could inform the design of a large scale study on the impact of specific policies.

Research Context

Significance

Numerous literature reviews and studies have pointed out to the serious challenges faced by African universities (Assie- Lumumba, 2006; Bloom et al., 2005 ; Sawyerr, 2004; Teferra, 2004; Teferra, 2008; Majavu, 2009). Among others, such challenges include: mounting enrollments, lack of infrastructures, poor student-teacher ratios, low research output, lack of relevance of curriculum. Cameroonian Universities certainly reflect most of these challenges (Njeuma et al., 1999; Ngwana, 2003; Samfoga-Doh, 2011). On the other hand the Government of Cameroon has launched a strategic vision to become an emerging country by 2035 (Government of Cameroon, 2012). Such an ambitious development plan will need the necessary human capital to carry it out more than ever. Higher education institutions are primary producers of human resources and hubs of knowledge creation. Hence, catalyzing the higher education system to accomplish Vision 2035 seems to hold a much promise for a successful implementation of the vision.

Conceptual Framework: Based on a review of the literature, a tentative trajectory of African Higher Education systems could be drawn as follow:





**2010s & Forward: NECESSITY FOR A TRANSFORMATION
OF AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION TO RESPOND TO
DEVELOPMENT ISSUES**

This pilot study aims to explore the evolution of the Cameroonian higher education system. We hope to verify whether the Cameroonian experience reflects the tentative trajectory above and uncover some of its particularities. Specific research questions under investigation in this exploratory study are:

- 1) How did Cameroonian Universities come to face the current challenges they are facing?
- 2) How are the 1993 reforms perceived and what have they accomplished? Why have these policies not been as effective as the government intended them to be?
- 3) What is the future of higher education in Cameroon? What are some priority areas to address in order to revitalize the sector? How can Cameroon transform this sector to reach its Vision 2035 destination?

Research Design

Research Approach

This exploratory study employs qualitative case study methodology. According to Yin (2003) case studies are suitable when how and why questions are under investigations. The focus of this study is to understand how and why the Cameroonian higher education system has come to face its current challenges. We attempted to achieve this through an integrated qualitative design.

The universities selected for this study are: University of Yaounde, University of Douala, University of Ngaoundere, University of Dschang, and University of Buea. Out of the eight existing public universities in Cameroon, these are the oldest, each being at least 20 years old. Also, the populations in these institutions are conveniently representative of the population of Cameroon, though residents of the regions where they are respectively located tend to have relatively higher percentages of enrollment.

Data Collection

Data Collection for this project will follow two types of the sources of evidence suggested by Yin (2003): documentation and interviews. Documentation involved acquiring policy documents from the Ministry of Higher Education. In particular, key documents pertaining to the 1993 reforms – which were most significant – were studied.

Semi-structured interviews, conducted over the phone, constituted the most important component of data collection for this project. A purposeful sample of 10 participants was targeted for this study. Participants were pre-identified and invited to the study based of the following criteria: a) has worked at one of the selected University for a minimum of 20 years; b) has been vocal about the necessity of transformation of the Cameroonian higher education system (popular press, tv interviews, etc...). These criteria were chosen to generate a sample of interviews that will be rich in insights and meaningful. The goal was to have 2 interviews coming from key informants in each of the selected universities. Out of the ten professors contacted for the pilot study, 6 responded positively but only three interviews were successfully scheduled and conducted.

Discussion and Analysis

The goal of this exploratory study was to collect insights on the trajectory that led the Cameroonian higher education (H.E.) system to face its current challenges. Because it was important to capture as full a picture as possible of the perspectives provided, an open coding approach was used. Along Weiss' "issue focused" analysis scheme (Weiss, 1994), the following "themes" or "initial codes" initiated the process of data analysis:

1. Interviewee background and experience in Cameroonian H.E. system
2. Interviewee's motivations for joining the system
3. Assessment of how far their original vision has been fulfilled
4. Thoughts on a major higher education reform (1993) in Cameroon
5. Future of higher education reform in Cameroon
6. Additional information, suggestions or resources from interviewee

Using these "themes", Nvivo 9 was used to sort out and organize the data under the relevant themes. (See Appendix 2 for the outcome of this process). Because only three interviews were conducted, and these interviews were not connected to any direct observations, analysis is limited to speculations based on experiential knowledge and knowledge from the literature. **Table 1** below illustrates the types of answers expected vs. the actual answers provided by the three interviewees. One interview yielded a particularly surprising finding: while it was expected that veteran faculty had come back to Cameroon to contribute to its development, one participant's sole motivation for joining the Cameroonian higher education system was monetary. The participant clearly stated that he "applied for the job, got it, and the government paid for him and his family to return to Cameroon."

The additional information provided by the participants highlighted to the importance of considering the private sector in higher education in Cameroon. One comment lamented the lack of linkages between the private sector and the current Cameroonian higher education system; another lamented the growth a private sector of higher education institutions which is not regulated by the Cameroonian government.

One interesting recommendation from an interviewee was that “*politics should leave the campus*”. Comprehensive literature reviews on challenges of higher education in Africa repeatedly cite politics as a major bottleneck (Assie- Lumumba, 2006; Bloom et al., 2005 ; Sawyerr, 2004; Teferra, 2008; Majavu, 2009). Therefore, this perspective is likely to be representative of larger group of stakeholders (including students).

All in all, the three interviews mostly confirmed the conjectures posited based on the literature on the political economy of higher education in Africa. All three participants echoed each other on the lack of investment in infrastructures that had been observed over the years, despite a tremendous growth in enrollment. They also agreed that this infrastructure crisis should be on the priority list of a reform agenda. The 1993 reforms were seen by all three as policies that had the potential to make significant changes, but whose implementation was very fragmented. Some criticism of policymakers emerged. One participant particularly commented on the lack of consultation with stakeholders within the University when the 1993 reforms were made. As a faculty member, the respondent felt he was left at the margin of the policymaking process throughout his time in the Cameroonian higher education system. This point of view was also slightly shared by another respondent. Out of the three respondents, one was retired and two

were still teaching. Interestingly, the retired professor is the one that was most vocal about shortcomings of the system. The other two respondents were cautious in their critiques.

Table 1: expected vs. actual findings

Theme	“expected” finding	“actual” finding
Interviewee background and experience with the Cameroonian higher education system	We expect interviewees to have acquired most, if not all of their post-secondary education abroad, especially in France, given colonial ties	Verified Interviewees all earned their respective PhDs in France
Interviewee’s motivations for joining the system	We expect the interviewee to be motivated by a desire to contribute to the development of the country	Verified except for one One interviewee solely returned to Cameroon because of the job offer itself and not with a purpose to contribute to development
Assessment of how far their original vision has been fulfilled	Given the widely documented lack of infrastructure, strategy, and resources (Njeuma et al. 1999; Samfoga-Doh, 2011; Ngwana, 2003) we expect the interviewee to be disappointed with the current system for the most part.	Verified
Thoughts on major higher education reform (1993) in Cameroon	We expect to note mixed feelings about the 1993 reforms (Njeuma et al. 1999; Samfoga-Doh, 2011)	Verified: Interviewees acknowledged the promising character of reform but deplored that it was not fully implemented

Future of higher education reform in Cameroon	We expect interviewees to be vocal about where the Cameroonian higher education system should be headed	Verified: e.g. “politics should leave the campus”
Additional information, suggestions or resources from interviewee	We are open throughout the process about additional information, suggestions and resources from the interviewee	One interviewee made interesting comments about role of private sector

Limitations and Future Research

Results reported here only rely on analysis of policy documents and qualitative data from three interviews. One way this pilot study could have been improved is through the use of an additional source of evidence: direct observations. Direct observations would have facilitated a current account of the challenges described in the review of the literature. A set of two field trips to each of the selected universities could have been carried out. The observations would have yielded illustrations for key issues such as high enrollments, lack of resources, poor teacher-students ratios, and poor learning environments. Another limitation of the study is the low response. Out of the targeted 10 participants, only three participated. Though the three participants were from three different universities, the data collected has hardly achieved the intended aim. Rather, it has only provided a starting point for a larger scale study. A tentative timeline for such a study can be found in **Appendix 3**. Furthermore, all three interviews were conducted over the phone. Hence, analysis is based on interview notes and not fully transcribed interviews. A fuller picture of insights might be achieved by a more formal set-up for the interview, which involved minimal cost to both interviewee and interviewer. Together, a larger number of interviews and direct observations would have made for a stronger pilot study.

Conclusion

“The university must become a primary tool for Africa’s development in the new century. Universities can help develop African expertise; they can enhance the analysis of African problems; strengthen domestic institutions; serve as a model environment for the practice of good governance, conflict resolution and respect for human rights, and enable African academics to play an active part in the global community of scholars.”

Kofi Annan – Former Secretary General of the United Nations (in 2003)

As aptly stated by Former UN Secretary a decade ago, knowledge and advanced skills will be critical determinants of Africa’s economic growth and standard of living as learning outcomes are transformed into goods and services, greater institutional capacity, a more effective public sector, a stronger civil society, and a better investment climate. Good quality, merit-based, equitable, efficient tertiary education and research are essential parts this transformation. Both developing and industrial countries benefit from the dynamic of the knowledge economy (World Bank, 2012). The capacity for countries to adopt, disseminate, and maximize rapid technological advances is dependent on adequate systems of tertiary education. Improved and accessible tertiary education and effective national innovations systems can help a developing country progress toward sustainable achievements in the Millennium Development Goals, particularly those goals related to all levels of education, health, and gender equity. Learning more from the Cameroonian higher education system successes and failures is crucial to putting the country on the path to transformation. A first step would be a full scale study expanding on this work.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this pilot study. First, tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to your first position in higher education in Cameroon. You can discuss the following points, as well as any other relevant detail that comes to mind:

- Function, field of research and/ or teaching, etc ...
- How long have you been involved in the Cameroonian system of higher education?
- What were you doing before? Where were you trained?
- Review the changes you have seen and how they affected your work.
- Tell me about a time of controversy, setbacks, and / or hard times

2. When you chose to accept your original function in higher education in Cameroon, what motivated you to do? Did you have a vision for the kind of impact that you could have in this sector?

More specifically:

- If you have studied abroad, have you decided to come back in order to contribute to development?
- Tell me about the process to acquire your first job in higher education Cameroon
- Did you think this position would have an impact on your life? On the lives of other Cameroonians?

3. Has your vision - assuming you had one - materialized? If so, how? If not, why?

4. Do you think the major reforms that have been implemented to date the last two decades have been successful? If yes, how so, if not, why?

In particular:

- What do you think of the 1993 reforms?

5. What do you think the future of higher education in Cameroon lack of implementation of policies to address the major challenges?

- Do you think major reforms should be introduced in order to move the country to the "Vision 2035" (i.e. Cameroon as an emerging country)?
- If yes, what kinds of reforms need to happen? What are the most pressing challenges?

6. Is there anything else you want to share your experience in Cameroon higher education that was not mentioned above?

Also...

- Are there any questions you think I should have asked which I have not asked?
- Are there people you could recommend, for more on this topic?

Appendix 2

1. Interviewee background and experience with the Cameroonian higher education (H.E.) system

Background before taking the post in Cameroon

Interview #1

- ♣ 1979 - 1980: PhD in Statistics in Paris-6
- ♣ 1980 - 1981: Supplemental Instructor at the University Reims, France

Interview #2

- ♣ Bachelors and PhD in Management Sciences from Universités de Montpellier III, Paris-Sorbonne René Descartes, Lyon 3 (France)

Interview #3

- ♣ PhD in Management, Université de Bordeaux (France)

Experience in the Cameroonian Higher Education system

Interview #1

- Lecturer from January 1982 to date
(Operations Research, Statistics and probability, Marketing)
- ♣ 1987 - 1992: Head of Department data analysis and information processing
 - ♣ 1996 - 2002: Head of marketing department

Interview #2

30 years in the Cameroonian Higher Education from Lecturer to Administrator

Interview #3

20 years in the Cameroonian Higher Education system

Policy developments witnessed by interviewees

- ♣ 1982 - 1988: Cooperation with HEC Montreal. Canadians have been heavily involved in the reform of teaching.
- ♣ 1988 - 2001: Removal of the Master's program, which seriously undermined the image of the school
- ♣ 2001: return to provision of the Master's program

♣ 2005: LMD system (Bachelors-Masters-Doctorate)

2. Interviewee's motivations for joining the Cameroonian H.E. system

Interview #1

Honestly, I did not consider [becoming a lecturer in a Cameroonian University] as a sacrifice. I knew I could better develop myself in Cameroon and more as teacher than an employee in a company. The interviewee mentioned that routine of life in the European country where he acquired his post-secondary education was not the type of routine he would like, so once he applied for a job in a Cameroonian university and was accepted, since the government offered to pay tickets for him and his family to return to Cameroon, it was a no-brainer.

Interview #2

It was a patriotic return for me. I had a personal need for affirmation of African leadership operating in Africa and internationally competitive, without any complex of inferiority towards westerners

Interview #3

Professor Pougoue came to recruit young PhD at the University of Bordeaux and I was selected. I could have stayed in France to work, but I thought the needs in Cameroon were more important. I wanted to make a name for myself as someone who had contributed to something meaningful for my country.

3. Assessment of how far their original vision has been fulfilled

My vision has not been formally materialized because nobody has asked for my opinion. Policies that do not involve stakeholders' vision cannot be positively carried out.

“For me personally, I opened a consulting firm to improve my financial situation, but also to make my lessons more practical.”

My vision was to accomplish a successful career as an academic at the national and international level and I did just that.

4. Thoughts on major higher education reform in Cameroon (1993)

Interviewee#1

According to interviewee the 1993 reforms did not accomplish very much. The intentions were good including the idea of bringing universities closer to their economic environment. But this remained theoretical and this policy goal did not happen “It stayed at the theoretical level”

Interviewee#2

Reforms were absolutely necessary at the time, but the process of implementation was incomplete

Interviewee#3

The most important reforms are the 1993 reforms which decentralized the original system to create regional universities. These reforms were successful in expanding access and lowering enrollment pressure on the flagship university, university of Yaounde. However, the newly created universities have not been strategically designed, which might lead into recreating the very issues that the reforms originally intended to solve.

5. Future of higher education reform in Cameroon from all interviewees

Interviewee #1

The outlook is poor: the number of quality teachers is becoming weaker. Infrastructures are not being considered as a priority. There is no real commitment to reform.

The first reform should concern the infrastructure, and then efforts to significantly improve higher education governance. Faculty should be involved in the management and possibly elect their leaders.

ESSEC (Graduate School of Economics and Commercial Sciences) – where the interviewee worked – as several other schools lost its autonomy and career because she found herself directly involved in academic orientation changes that have been made without taking into the expectations of businesses and organizations.

“Politics should leave the campus”

Interviewee # 2

Promising future with the gradual professionalization of training courses in state universities, the development of private higher education, relocation to Cameroon training programs at foreign universities, international scientific influence of Cameroonian academics

Considerable imperative for the improvement of business environment and investment climate to increase the entrepreneurial commitment of Cameroon and Cameroon attractiveness for foreign investors

Interviewee # 3

There is a notable motivation crisis within the Cameroonian higher education system. The state should do the maximum to promote the profession. What we are now seeing is a migration of faculty from universities to lucrative government or private sector positions. This could constitute a serious danger for the future of higher education in Cameroon. A revision of salaries and benefits of university faculty and administrators is in order. Take Senegal for example. Faculty and Administrators are provided with housing there and paid decent incomes. Cameroonian policymakers have a lot to learn from other African countries in this domain

6. Additional information, suggestions or resources from interviewees

- ♣ The sad time for [him] was the opening of business programs in the universities which initially represented a real solution but turned out to be a rip-off - students paid and did not have much return on their investments. Such programs pretended to be designed for labor market, hence implying that graduates could be assured that they would be employed following their diplomas, but the Faculty and administrators had no real commitment coordinate with companies.
- ♣ You should think about the role of private universities. Many private universities are being created without a government framework to regulate them; there is a real risk of such institutions being only profit centers.

Appendix 3: Proposed Timeline for a full case study

