Garbage in - Garbage out: the Need to Strengthen Institutional Management Capacity of the Higher Education System in Cameroon

Titanji Peter Fon
Department of Educational Foundation and Administration, University of Buea, Cameroon

Abstract

The Republic of Cameroon has three ministries of education - the Ministries of Basic, Secondary, and Higher Education. The encouragement of education at each of these levels is a national priority as reflected in existing legislation and annual budgetary allocations relative to other ministries. For example, basic and secondary education ranked first and third, relative to other ministries, in terms of budgetary allocation for the 2006 fiscal year. Institutional management at each level of schooling has been entrusted to appointed personnel in both the public and the private sectors. They occupy different positions with varied job demands or role expectations. Some, like deans and directors, are expected to sign commitment and payment orders, prepare and manage budgets, do performance appraisals for academic and support staff, among others. The responsibilities of a principal officer, regardless of position within the hierarchy, cannot be performed at acceptable, let alone, superior level, without basic training. A major part of the job of a principal officer is to create and nurture optimal condition for effective and efficient performance of individuals and sub-units. Regardless of how skilled collaborators may be, regardless of available state of the art technology, to guarantee superior performance requires successful combination of resources into a well-functioning system, the ultimate test of administrative excellence. A consistent theme that runs throughout this paper is the argument that principal officers lack the competence and have not been supported to meet this challenge.

Introduction

The need to strengthen capacity of staff has been a recognized challenge at all levels of schooling in Cameroon. For example, there is precedence in this direction in the University of Buea. During its academic planning week, the Faculty of Education, under the auspices
of the Department of Academic Affairs, usually organizes a workshop on various aspects of teaching for newly recruited academic personnel. Structures also need to be put in place to strengthen the capacity of management personnel, who for the most part, emerge from classrooms and laboratories. Furthermore, under the auspices of the Association of African Universities (AAU), many Senior University Management Workshops (SUMAs) have been held in various parts of Africa for vice chancellors and top executives from universities across Africa. The workshops, according to Professor Akilagpa Sawyer, the AAU's Director of Research, are designed to help university leaders who might have excellent academic credentials but minimal or no managerial experience. The goal has been to increase their understanding of issues and problems relating to the changing environment of higher education in Africa and to strengthen their management and administrative capabilities and providing tools to increase effectiveness and efficiency in African universities (University of Cape Town, 1997). We are of the opinion that the higher education system should copy the example of the AAU and make management and administrative workshops available to all appointed officials.

To have a quality higher education system requires, among other things, very qualified personnel (academic, support and administrative). Within our higher education system, considerable attention is paid to the professional development of academic staff, but little or nothing is done to strengthen the capacity of appointed officials. We insist that the possession of a terminal degree or enrolment in a doctorate programme should be a prerequisite for teaching. We provide staff development assistance to enable teachers conduct research and attend conferences in order to increase their competence and performance. The underlying assumption for our actions is that there are certain characteristics or abilities employees bring to the work situation. Ideally, these characteristics or competencies enable them to perform at acceptable or superior levels. An individual in a given role is expected to draw from his or her competencies to fulfill the responsibilities of a given job.

Even though competence is one of the key variables in the effective performance equation; "it has received the least systematic attention within the field of management and organization studies" (Boyatzis, 1982:20). For example, it will not be surprising that many individuals occupying administrative positions do not know how to write a memorandum. We cannot continue to conceive educational administration as a job that can be done well with minimal or no
preparation and support. In-service development opportunities have to be embedded into the work of practising administrators. Generally, the job of a principal officer, regardless of hierarchy level, is to help their respective units achieve stated objectives through the utilization of available, albeit scarce resources. This is done by performing the traditional functions of planning, coordinating, motivating and directing these resources. Put simply, principal officers (vice chancellors and their immediate deputies, deans and directors, heads of services and departments, chief of services, among others) are expected to get things done with and through other people.

In this paper, we argue that principal officers of the nation’s higher education are the most neglected in terms of capacity building, relative to their respective job descriptions. It is organised into three parts. The first part brings out arguments in favour of training structures for officials within the higher education system in the Republic of Cameroon. In the second part, we present a simple model of effective performance and examine its components. In the final part, an attempt is made to sketch the way forward or what we think can be done.

The Need

There are many inter-related reasons why we think an end should be put to the neglect of the training of practising administrators within the higher education system. The first reason has to do with the importance of the higher education system, documented evidence of its problems and challenges (The World bank, 1994; Saint, 1992; The University of Buea, 1998) and urgent calls for reform. This level of schooling is essential to individuals and the society at large. Some of the main reported crisis indicators include unsustainable funding, constraints on educational opportunities, internal and external inefficiencies, and inequality of access and experience, based on gender and socio-economic background. The actions or inactions of appointed officials will determine whether our higher education system serves us well or whether our meager talents and resources will be squandered (Mintzberg, 1971). A recurrent theme in most reform proposals is the need to pay greater attention to institutional governance. With abundance evidence of shortcoming in our higher education system, we cannot afford to continue to do business as usual but must demonstrate commitment to systemic changes, not only in our oral expressions, but also in what we do.
The second reason stems from the positive relationship between competence and performance. The possession of relevant knowledge builds the confidence of employees and self-confidence is integral to greater commitment and performance (Boyatzis, 1982). The process of assuming administrative responsibilities within the nation's higher education system absolutely pays no attention, before or after appointments, to the administrative competencies of those appointed. Administrative personnel, for the most part, emerge from the ranks of academic staff. The operational logic is that the competencies required for being a successful academic (teacher and researcher) can be successfully transferred to positions in school administration. According to the International Labour Organisation, the shift from teaching to a mix of teaching and administration is not usually easy, especially in the absence of socialization structures for the provision of needed competence. It is therefore imperative to design and implement structures to enable university leaders who might have excellent academic credentials, but minimal or no managerial or administrative experience to acquire basic administrative and management competence.

Effectiveness and efficiency have been seen as twin concepts in the management literature. Before, greater attention was only paid to the concept of effectiveness. Performance effectiveness and performance efficiency are increasingly being acknowledged as basic criteria for measuring the success of an administrator (Schermerhorn, 1984). Performance effectiveness is a measure of goal accomplishment regardless of associated costs. Because of the possibility of accomplishing goals with little or no concern for the rational use of resources, the concept of performance efficiency, especially against the backdrop of economic crisis and scarce resources, has been added to performance effectiveness as a measure of administrative success. It is the measure of the costs incurred with goal accomplishment. It is generally computed in the form of a ratio of outputs realized (goods and/or services) to inputs consumed in the process.

The increasingly changing responsibilities of appointed officials of the higher education system constitute further need for training. These individuals occupy positions in which they are expected to exert quality leadership, to create social and intellectual environments worthy of the pursuit of excellence in all its manifestations. While some of the vital decisions that shape university life are made in Yaounde, principal officers, especially at the level of individual institutions, make important decisions and act in ways that can affect the social and
academic life of the system and the amount of energy staff bring to their work. In the country today, gathering and maintaining good people in the higher education system is a daunting challenge in spite of widespread unemployment. The fact that many academics are leaving in search of greener pastures may be related to the quality of prevailing leadership. If well trained, the actions of administrative personnel can increase the system’s holding power on available employees and attract more talent.

Furthermore, these appointed officials at various levels are expected to be able to collect, analyze and use data in ways that fuel excellence within the system, and serve as instructional leaders who create exciting, interesting and challenging teaching, research and learning environments. We expect them to nurture the professional development of staff; to be imbued with a big picture awareness of the societal role of the higher education system; to share leadership with others; and to build bridges with other stakeholders. We also expect them to ensure transparent and appropriate use of resources entrusted to their care, especially in view with new policies of greater decentralization and devolution of management. Much is presently being done to decentralize and devolve educational management from the pedagogical, administrative and financial perspectives. For example, Decree No. 2005/383 of October 17, 2005 gives increased financial management to institutional managers such as deans, directors and heads of department. One of the consequences of decentralization policies is to decrease dependence on the state and increase it on local stakeholders. These are very reasonable expectations. However, what is not regular, and which constitutes a problem, is the fact that little or nothing is done to prepare practising administrators to fulfil these expectations. While on the one hand we share the view that education personnel, especially those occupying administrative positions, should be called to assume greater responsibility and accountability for what goes on within their sub-units, we must on the other hand equip them with what it takes to do it. To this end, training of principal officers will be very important in building capacity at the local level to ensure more effective and efficient management of scarce resources.

Improving the performance of practising educational administrators in this country has been recognized at lower levels of schooling. For example, in 1990, Education Ministers of Commonwealth countries met in Barbados and reflected on ways of
improving the performance of head teachers/principals. This was
can be helped to know what contributions they can make towards improvements of the higher education system.

Another need for improved institutional governance through the training of principal officers can be obtained from the world of organizational psychology. Whether we like it or not, we are forced to work in order to earn a living for ourselves (Schermernhorn, 1984) and those who depend on us. Work is therefore a normal part of life. Employee's job satisfaction has been linked to the perceived congruence between work-related challenges and the ability of employees to fulfill them (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Ability is partly a function of an employee's preparation. When employees perceive they are well prepared relative to work expectations, they are more likely to have high sense of efficacy or an "I can do it" attitude, which is a prerequisite for excellent performance.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) suggests that, regardless of type of organization, employees who are inadequately prepared will be unable to meet work-related challenges. He further adds that when challenges or work demands exceed an employee's competence, anxiety, which is likely to lead to job dissatisfaction, is produced. To Ashton and Webb (1986), inadequately prepared education personnel are prone to questioning or doubting their sense of ability to realize expected outcomes. Perceptions about ability will influence choice of activities, as well as the amount of effort expended.

Against this backdrop, the need for work, especially the work of employees of a university, to be well done is very important because of the expected outcomes of the higher education system. The foregoing suggests that most appointed officials, especially at the beginning of their administrative careers, are likely to face issues of self-doubt. It is logical to expect them to doubt their ability to perform as expected without basic training. In the absence of training, they can easily become dissatisfied at work. The transition from being a teacher to assuming full administrative responsibilities should not be abrupt, but one characterized by norms of socialization. Instead of allowing them to either swim or sink alone, part of the envisaged challenge is to provide needed support in the form of basic training.

A Model of Effective and Efficient Job Performance
In this section, the components of a simple model of effective and efficient performance, adapted from the management literature, are presented and examined as follows:

As shown in the diagram, the model reveals three variables- (i) job demands, (ii) individual competencies, and (iii) the organizational environment- as determinants of effective and efficient performance. It suggests that effective and efficient performance, what we desire of every principal officer, will result when there is congruence between work-related challenges or demands, the competence of the individual occupying a given position, and variables within the organizational environment.

This simple model presents three critical prerequisites of effective and efficient performance in an administrative role. It suggests that the competence, which of a principal officer brings into the specific office he/she has been appointed into, the demand of the job or expected
responsibilities, and the environment within which he/she carries out assigned responsibilities, are vital determinants of performance effectiveness and efficiency. If any of these elements is not in congruence, then there is a very high probability that ineffective performance or inaction will result.

In our case, the job demand component deals with what principal officers (deans, vice dean, faculty officers, and heads of departments, among others) are expected to do in their respective positions. The Higher Education Reform of 1993 provides job description for most of the positions.

Universities in Cameroon, like other formal organizations, exist within an environment. The organizational environment refers to the economic, political, social and technological forces within which the higher education system operates. The economic environment consists of employers, parents, friendly donor organizations (The World Bank, AAU, UNESCO, ADB, among others), whose actions can affect the demand for services and resources availability. The political environment includes, among others, interest groups or stakeholders, and the legal-judicial framework (decrees, ministerial circular letters, and laws). The social environment consists of the prevailing culture, demographic characteristics, as well as basic characteristics of persons within the society. The technological environment includes available technologies. The above variables can be said to lie within the external environment.

There is also an internal organizational environment comprising of the prevailing culture and climate within various higher education institutions. The culture refers to shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that shape the behaviour of members, while the climate refers to the perceptual feel that workers have for a particular higher education institution. The periling climate is an index of the quality of work life of members within an institution, while culture influences its capacity to change the behaviour and the work habits of its members. These variables can combine to create stable, dynamic, or uncertain environments.

An environment can hurt or help an organization or a system. The environment, which can be rich or poor, constitutes an important input to the planning process (Schamermthon, 1984). An environment can be described as 'rich' in terms of the support it provides to the system on economic, political, social, or technological grounds. For example, it can be argued that legislation that limits user fees to 50,000 FCFA per year
may be enabling from the point of view of concerns of equity or social justice, but may not be enabling from the perspective of university finance and governance. Or, the non enforcement of legislation that states that principal officers of state universities are supposed to be elected, not appointed, hurts institutional governance. If job expectations conflict with aspects of the external environment, effective job performances will either not be forthcoming, or it may be highly inefficient.

There are many definitions of competency. For our purpose we will modify-adopt that of Klemp (1980), cited by Boyatzi (1982, 21), who defines a competency as: "an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job." We will add the concepts of interest to us — competency and effective aspect of one's self image or social role, or body of knowledge which plays a social role, and efficient performance. A competency could be knowledge, skills, or attitudes. A skill is the ability to translate knowledge into action that will result in desirof
likely to need more conceptual than technical skills. Those at lower administrative levels need more technical and human relations skills.

The Way Forward

In this part of the paper, an attempt is made to present what can be done to strengthen the capacity of management personnel within the higher education system. We argue that we do not need experts from outside the system to do so. All that needs to be done is to operate on the logic that the system is loaded with experts in different walks of life. For example, some of the academic departments within the larger system (for example, the Departments of Educational Foundations and Administration, Political Science and Public Administration, Law, and Economics) are in the business of providing relevant training for management positions in the public and private sector. These departments can be charged with the responsibility of mounting in-service courses in the educational administration to newly appointed principal officers. In addition, there are also specialists providing various services (stores accountants, accounting officers, financial controllers) who can be used as resource persons.

Two conceptions dominate debate on the in-service professional development of principals and other educational leaders. On the one hand are those who are of the opinion that the beneficiaries of professional development ought to decide what kinds of assistance they want and need. On the other hand are those who argue that those who are educational administrators should be allowed to identify essential skills and knowledge needed for effective and efficient administration. The two dominant paradigms need to be merged. In other words, the syllabus or content for in-service development workshops will be based on a combination of what those who are appointed to head institutions want to know and do, and also on what the research suggests they need to know and do.

Step One: Acknowledgement

The first step is to acknowledge and accept the fact that being an excellent teacher or researcher does not necessarily translate into being excellent in an administrative capacity. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that there is specialized basic competence that principal officers need in order to increase their competence.

Step Two: Job Analysis
With acceptance that there is a need, the next step is to study each position within the administrative hierarchy in order to be familiar with what it takes for effective and efficient performance.

**Step Three: Establish Priority Needs**  
The results of the job analysis, and the specific job descriptions, should be used in this step to establish priority objectives and content of training workshops. The Delphi or other Technique(s) can be used to establish these priorities for various administrative positions and levels.

**Step Four: Sourcing for Resources**  
Material and human resources will be needed. This will require assessing and knowing what is available within the system itself and what can be obtained from elsewhere.

**Step Five: Training Workshop(s)**  
With priority objectives and content determined, the next step is to provide in-service training workshops at an appropriate time. The issue of time is very important because of the multiple demands on the time of officials within the system.

**Step Six: Evaluation**  
An instrument should be used before and after training to determine the extent to which training objectives have been met. This can be done using a questionnaire that captures the perceptions of trainees before and after training workshop(s). This should be followed up with performance appraisal after training has been offered.

**Summary: A Matter of Will**  
In this paper, an attempt has been made to argue for capacity building among those occupying administrative positions within the higher education system in the Republic of Cameroon. These individuals are, for the most part, academics turned administrators. Such an endeavour is unlikely to succeed in the absence of enabling systemic policies, and policies within individual institutions.

The array of policies governing activities in schools emanate from the ministries of education, denominational education secretariats, and private individuals, depending on the type of school. This project cannot succeed in the absence of enabling policies from these sources.
We are therefore counting on the partnership and cooperation of these policy makers. The proposal is based on the logic that if we can devise ways to help practising educational administrators to individually and collectively become better practitioners, benefits will accrue to them as individuals and to the system as a whole. Ultimately, the success if this project will depend on our collective aspirations for the educational system and the will not to see those dreams deferred. We do not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead, notably, in the form of resources, enabling policies and commitment from all stakeholders. We are confident that in working on them together, we will make significant progress.

References
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