

Recruitment of international students into Cameroon tertiary institutions in the absence of International Offices

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The African Union and NEPAD have paved the way for more and significant co-operation between all sectors of the economy in Africa, tertiary education inclusive. The African tertiary institutions have more trusting links and co-operation with other institutions in the United States and Europe than those on the African continent for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include strengthening of their programmes, student and staff exchange programmes and gaining financial assistance for both students and staff for academic projects. With new and challenging opportunities ushered in by the African Union and NEPAD, African tertiary institutions need to forge a new partnership within the continent for the benefit of the continent at the dawn of this millennium. It is in this light that international offices at tertiary institutions will have to play a leading role in this new partnership. There are many countries whose tertiary institutions are still in the infancy stages and need technical and expert assistance from older African counterparts. The South African and North African tertiary institutions have a firmer academic grip and stability given their long existence and should therefore stretch a hand of fellowship to their counterparts in other parts of the continent. This can only be enhanced with the pivotal role of the international offices at both ends. Cameroon's tertiary institutions have been operating without international offices and international students' recruitment and concerns have individually been dealt with in a haphazard manner. Most of the international students' recruitment and their problems have been the concern of the Department of Academic Affairs and the receiving department at each tertiary institution. However, in professional schools where access is through competitive entrance examination, international students are recruited and sent by their governments through diplomatic channels. Whatever it is they are confronted with is the responsibility of the professional school and the student's diplomatic missions. Cameroon is operating a bilingual educational system inherited from the French and the British, with English and French as official languages. Until 1993 when more universities were established, there was only one university in Cameroon (University of Yaounde established in 1961). Today, there are six state universities and a few private tertiary institutions that

were recently authorized in the production of scholarship. Apart from the six state universities, other Cameroon tertiary institutions are mostly professional schools that are autonomous but under the tutelage of government ministries. Many have been affiliated to some of these newly created universities. International students have most often been recruited from the neighbouring Francophone countries. The French language, which is mostly used as the medium of instruction in these institutions, has acted as a deterrent to other prospective English-speaking international students from other countries. The University of Buea, which was established on Anglo-Saxon educational tradition, though government interference in its administration is heavily felt, is attracting a good number of international students, mostly across Africa. The rationale is how these institutions have been dabbling with the issue of international students' recruitment and why there is the need for a separate office to handle international students' recruitment and their concerns within these dynamic institutions.

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Introduction

The African Union (AU) and NEPAD have paved the way for more and significant co-operation between all sectors of the economy in Africa, tertiary education inclusive. The African tertiary institutions have more trusting links and co-operation with other institutions in the United States and Europe than those on the African continent for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons include strengthening of their programmes; student and staff exchange programmes and gaining financial assistance for both students and staff for academic projects. With new and challenging opportunities ushered in by the AU and NEPAD, African tertiary institutions need to forge a new partnership within the continent for the benefit of the continent at the dawn of this millennium. It is in this light that international and/or co-operation offices of tertiary institutions will have to play a leading role in this new partnership. There are many countries whose tertiary institutions are still in their infancy stages and need technical and expert assistance from older African counterparts.

The South African and North African tertiary institutions have a firmer academic grip on scholarship production, given their long existence. They should therefore stretch a hand of fellowship to their counterparts in other parts of the continent. This can only be enhanced with the pivotal role of the international and/or co-operation offices at both ends. Cameroon's tertiary institutions have been operating without international offices and international students' recruitment and concerns have individually been dealt with in a haphazard manner. Most of the international students'

recruitment and their problems have been the concern of the Departments of Academic Affairs and the receiving department at each tertiary institution. However, in professional schools that access is through competitive entrance examinations, international students are recruited and sent by their governments through diplomatic channels. Whatever matter is confronting them is the responsibility of the professional school and the students' diplomatic mission.

Cameroon is operating a bilingual educational system inherited from the French and the British, with English and French as official languages. Until 1993, when more universities were established, there was only one university in Cameroon (University of Yaounde, established in 1961). Today, there are six state universities and a few private tertiary institutions that were recently authorized in the production of scholarship. Apart from the six state universities, other Cameroon tertiary institutions are mostly professional schools that are autonomous but under the tutelage of government ministries. Many have been affiliated to some of these newly created universities. International students have most often been recruited from the neighbouring Francophone countries. The French language, which is mostly used as the medium of instruction in these institutions, has acted as a deterrent to other prospective English-speaking international students from other countries.

The University of Buea, which was established on Anglo-Saxon educational tradition, though government interference in its administration is heavily felt, is attracting a good number of international students mostly across Africa. In this article we examine the evolution of these institutions and how they have been dabbling with the issue of international students' recruitment. It also behoves this study to establish the rationale why there is the need for a separate office or structure for handling of international students' recruitment and their concerns within these dynamic institutions.

Evolution of tertiary institutions and the appraisal of the 1993 reforms

Before 1993, Cameroon's university space was limited to the University of Yaounde, opened in 1962, and was overburdened and unable to effectively adapt to the changing societal needs. The problem was compounded by the growth of student enrolment without a corresponding human, material and financial backup. Attempts were made in the 1970s to solve this crucial problem of overcrowding with the establishment of university centres in Buea for Translation and Interpretation; in Dschang for Agriculture; in Douala for Technical Studies and Marketing and in Ngaoundere for Food Science and Technology. Admission into these university centres was based on competitive entrance examinations. All those admitted were absorbed into the public service after completion of their studies and government could

not afford to admit those who could not be recruited into the public service. There was wastage of resources at these centres as more space was available than necessary. The Buea University Centre, for example, could accommodate 2 000 students but only 60 students were admitted each year. There were no criteria for admission of international students at the University of Yaounde. University centres could admit foreign or international students only on the request of their governments.

Because of the limited number of students admitted into these university centres, overcrowding persisted at the University of Yaounde for the quest for general academic pursuits. In 1984, there were 18 000 students, in 1990, the enrolment went up to 32 000 and in 1991, it rose to 45 000 (University of Buea Strategic Plan). French and English are the official languages of Cameroon and instruction is supposed to be in the two official languages. French continued to dominate the curriculum and instruction to the detriment of the Anglophone students. This is in contradiction to Part 1 Section 5 of the law on the orientation of higher education in

and services; revive and maximize inter-university and international co-operation (Ngwana, 2000:3).

The above goals of the reforms of higher education in Cameroon show that there seems to have been no intent before the reforms that the system could open its doors to international students. These reforms therefore paved the way for the admission of international students into Cameroon's universities, though without a precise policy. This is not to say that there were no international students at universities in Cameroon. There were some isolated and sporadic cases.

The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in collaboration with the World Bank commissioned a Working Group on Higher Education (WGHE) to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the reforms (Ngwana, 2000:3"6). Its findings revealed that the strengths of the reforms included an increase in the success rate of students and regional representatives of study opportunities. Again, Anglophone students were given the unique opportunity to study entirely in English for the first time. Furthermore, the report noted that there was some success in the internal and external effectiveness and also in the financial and managerial autonomy. However, the weaknesses included a lack of facilities and the resultant effects of not absorbing the high number of post-secondary school graduates, especially from the Anglophone community.

The study by WGHE also revealed gross mismanagement because of a lack of adequate managerial skills and well-defined policy instruments. It revealed that financial constraints have been one of the major stumbling blocks in effectively implementing the reforms. As a result, many of these universities tend to turn to foreign donors for financial assistance. However, there is no guarantee that these funds, if disbursed, will be efficiently managed by the authorities, especially given the fact that Transparency International has once ranked Cameroon as the most corrupt country in the world in September 1988 (Nyamnjoh, 1999:101). Cameroon was also ranked first in 1999 and has subsequently been dangling within the first ten most corrupt countries in the world.

It is in this light that Terence Humphreys, former Director of the British Council in Yaounde, Cameroon, accused the university authorities that managers are unable to manage resources effectively or efficiently as a result of over-centralized administration and irregular funding. He noted that donors have shunned higher education in Cameroon which has consumed a disproportionate amount of the country's resources but has failed to produce the required analytical, sceptical, logical and questioning population that is needed by every country to grow (The Bun, 1999:3).

The reason for this is that the universities have not been able to offer professional education and training because of its costly nature. Titanji (2002:18) remarks that professionalism is a far-fetched dream that will take

a long time to achieve in Cameroon's universities. This, according to him, is because training a science student will cost 1 200 000 FCFA (\$1 000) per year, a medicine/engineering student 2 400 000 FCFA (\$2 000) and an arts/law student 700 000 FCFA (\$1 165) whereas they all pay a registration fee of 50 000 FCFA (\$85).

The creation of the University of Buea⁴ was a relief to most Anglophone students and parents. The creation triggered expectations for two reasons. The first reason is that it will not be a problem studying in French at the University of Yaounde anymore, since the university was established on Anglo-Saxon tradition. Secondly, the university was going to train and educate higher-level professionals of Anglophone origin who are in short supply in the country. Though the university was established on Anglo-Saxon tradition, the Ministry of Higher Education has never given it a free hand to exercise this much-cherished tradition. The vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellors, deans, heads of departments and all other service heads, whether academic or non-academic, are appointed by the President, Prime Minister and Minister of Higher Education depending on grade and rank of the appointee.

All state universities have much in common in terms of admission, fees, promotion of academic staff and so on. A commission controls promotion of academic staff centrally and it sits thrice a year in Yaounde.⁶

Admission criteria into state universities

The admission criteria as spelled out in the Decree creating state universities, among others, are that the student must have passed the Baccalaureate examination or the equivalent of at least two General Certificate of Education Examination (GCE) papers for English-speaking candidates. Also, they should have passed one of Cameroon's official languages, French or English at the GCE Ordinary level. The five other state universities, apart from the University of Buea, adhere to these admission criteria and are therefore said to have an open policy. This means that once a candidate has fulfilled these criteria and applied for admission, he or she is admitted into the university.

The University of Buea, purporting being run according to Anglo-Saxon tradition, has a two-semester academic year with a system of course credits. Admission into the university is based on a cut-off point. Because of the lack of facilities such as classrooms, a good library, offices and chronic staff shortages, it admits only a limited number of students from post-secondary schools that have high scores in their GCE Advanced-level results. In addition, a student must have passed English at the Ordinary level GCE. In order to provide Anglo-Saxon education to all Cameroonian children without discrimination against race or regional background, the University of Buea organizes a six week English-language course during the long vacation for

Francophone students seeking admission into the university.⁶ Those who pass the end-of-course examination are automatically admitted into their choice of courses. At the beginning of the 1999/2000 academic year, during a General Staff Meeting, it was hotly debated why Francophone candidates should be admitted into the University of Buea with little knowledge of English. This, it was argued, deprived the Anglophone students who — because of a low cut-off point or failure of the English language at the GCE Ordinary level — cannot be given the opportunity. Yet the francophone knowledge of English acquired during the scratch six-week course is insufficient to follow instructions at an English-medium university.

The bulk of other Anglophone students who have at least two GCE passes with low points or with high scores without English at the GCE Ordinary level are not admitted into the university they so much cherished. They have to seek admission into the other five universities where French is the dominant language of instruction. The effect is the same failure rate of students as before the reforms of higher education.

Admission requirements for international students as spelt out in the Law on the orientation of higher education are the same as for those of Cameroon.⁷ Section 11 (5) states that foreigners who fulfil the academic conditions provided for in Sub-section (1) may also be admitted into institutions of higher education in Cameroon, in accordance with international practices and/or with conditions and agreements signed between Cameroon and the countries of origin of candidates. Other
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Ministry of National Education that evaluates foreign certificates for those who wish to join the public service or upgrade their status through foreign-earned qualifications.

Before the 1993 reforms, students were given a stipend, but this has since been abolished with the institution of a registration fee of 50 000 FCFA (about \$85) per year. This has been to the dissatisfaction of the Breton Wood institutions (The World Bank and International Monetary Fund) as Cameroon was embracing the Structural Adjustment Programme. These institutions did not favour the creation of more universities on grounds that Cameroon does not have the funds to run them. International students pay 300 000 FCFA (about \$500) for Art courses and 600 000 FCFA (about \$1 000) for Science courses per year. Currently, it costs the Cameroon government between five and eight million FCFA (\$8 300-\$13 300) to educate one student per year (The Bun, 1999:3).

Specialized institutions (professional schools) and admission criteria

After gaining its independence in the early 1960s, Cameroon began to operate a series of professional schools or specialized institutions, which are still in existence. This is following the French model of professional schools in which professionals are trained to serve in the public service. Some of these professional schools include nursing schools, primary and secondary teachers' training colleges, a police centre for instruction and higher police college, the national school for magistracy and administration, national school for social welfare workers, agricultural colleges, survey schools, forestry schools, veterinary schools, post and telecommunication schools, and many others.

Admission into all professional schools is based on competitive entrance examinations (written and oral). On admission, one is considered a civil servant and is paid a monthly allowance. Upon graduation, the trained personnel are posted to a corresponding government department or ministry (with a lucrative salary and fringe benefits before salary slashes in the early 1990s). The course contents of these schools are often limited in scope and recruitment is based on the openings available in the public service, hence these institutions could not attract free entry irrespective whether infrastructure permitted it (Ngwana, 2000). These institutions are placed under the tutelage of a ministerial department. That is, the corresponding minister does the appointment of the school management team and their budgets in most cases are from such corresponding ministries. The head of the institution is answerable to the minister. For example, the national school for social welfare workers is controlled directly by the Minister of Social Affairs, the national post and telecommunication school controlled by the Minister of Post and Telecommunication, and so forth. Most ministries

have corresponding professional schools that train their personnel.

This is possibly why the university system in Cameroon, especially before the 1993 reforms, was not offering professional education and training. The mandate of the then university in Cameroon before 1993 was to train and educate individuals on a broad base without consideration of labour market demands. As a result, the private sector was starved without professionals since professional schools have only catered for the needs of the public service. However, with the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme in 1994 that restricted recruitment into the public service, most of these professional schools now train professionals for the private sector. Most of the privately trained professionals are left without jobs because school curricula are designed without considering the needs of the private sector. The sector that is benefiting enormously from this gesture is the private education sector. Some professional schools have now been affiliated to universities as faculties or schools following the higher education reforms.

Admission of international students into professional schools is different from admission into universities. Admission of international students is through negotiation with the two governments. Admissions are therefore through diplomatic channels that are beyond the understanding of many, though the candidate must have the required qualifications. They do not write the normal rigorous competitive entrance examinations that Cameroonians go through. This is the reason why the law on the orientation of higher education states in Section 11(5) admission of foreign students is in accordance with international practices and/or with conditions and agreements signed between Cameroon and the countries of origin of the candidates. Most of the students come from Francophone neighbouring countries with poor educational facilities such as Chad and the Central African Republic. Just as the universities, none of these institutions have a specific structure for dealing with their issues or processing of international students' applications for admission. Issues such as housing and extension of visas are at the mercy of the students with the assistance of their diplomatic mission in Cameroon. These schools do not provide accommodation or meals to students.

Private tertiary institutions

There are a few private universities and other tertiary institutions in Cameroon. In 2002, ten more have been granted permission to add to the much-needed expansion in the production of knowledge since the six state universities have not completely solved the production of scholarship in Cameroon. Little is known about their functioning, as most people are not interested in enrolling their children in them. It is hoped that with the authorization to offer professional courses, this will attract students as most

state universities are offering broad-based education, with few professional programmes.

The only well-structured private university is the Catholic University of Central Africa (UCAC), Yaounde, which started in the 1995/6 academic year with five faculties/schools. In 2000, the university had an enrolment of 1 237 students, a significant number being international students within the Central Africa sub-region whom are French speaking (Cameroon Statistical Yearbook, 2000:112). This does not preclude English-speaking students who are fluent in French and can cope with studies in the French language, though a few lectures are given in English. It has a specific office for handling international students' matters such as admission, housing, orientation programmes, visa issues, and others. This office might have been created because, as the name suggests, the university is a Catholic University meant for Central Africa and not for Cameroon alone, but simply located in Cameroon. Its admission criteria are the same as those of state universities. However, its tuition fee is 600 000 FCFA (\$1 000) per academic year, unlike in state universities.

Tertiary institutions and international links and co-operation

The main aims of links and co-operation between universities among others include facilitating and encouraging staff and curriculum development, undertaking joint research projects, acquiring scholarly journals and books, and the exchange of students. Many tertiary institutions, especially universities, have forged links and co-operation agreements with most other counterparts in the United States of America, Europe, the Commonwealth and very few with their African counterparts. As a result of these links, these institutions have acquired visiting lecturers to alleviate the shortage of staff in some disciplines, sending lecturers to acquire one or more skills and/or carry out research. It must be noted that this is a one-way link, that is, these institutions are only on the receiving end. This may be as a result of what Ibrahim (2002:3) perceived as Africa being increasingly marginalized and subjected to the hegemonic control by the major actors on the world scene.

Cameroon is centrally located on the continent of Africa. Ironically, tertiary institutions have very few links and co-operation agreements with their counterparts on the African continent. For example, the University of Buea have more than 90% of links and co-operation agreements with Europe and the United States and less than 10% with other African universities (The Bun, 1999:13). Similarly, other state universities have a couple of links with French and other European universities with only a few on the African continent. Africa has a unique history and this uniqueness should have given them an excellent platform to share experiences and learn from each

other. It is hoped that with the AU and NEPAD, the managers of these institutions will think in this direction.

International students and challenges

There are no statistics of international students in Cameroon's universities. It is believed that there are many given the huge number of foreigners in the country. According to an anonymous source at the Provincial Immigration Department in the South West Province, there are more than three million Nigerians alone in the country. The US Department of Commerce (1999:1 "2) estimated that there are about 14 000 non-Africans, including more than 6 000 French and 1 000 US citizens residing in the country. There are about 30 countries that have embassies in Cameroon as well as about 36 international organizations (Cameroon Statistical Yearbook, 2000:389). Given these tentative figures, it can be concluded that there are many international students in Cameroon's universities, though many of them are treated the same as Cameroonian students. They pay the same fees and enjoy the same facilities. Those who send in their applications indicating that they are residing outside of the country are those considered as international students. The reason is simply that there is no clear-cut admission policy for international students and this gives leeway to any institution to consider the applications the way they deem appropriate and necessary. Owing to this lack of policy on international students' admission, it was not thought to be an issue establishing international offices within the institutions' structures. For example, it was only in August 1999, that the Ministry of Higher Education created and appointed officials for Divisions of Co-operation, under which there are the service for national and international co-operation and the service for extra-African co-operation. However, these are simply co-operation offices and have nothing to do with admission of international students.

In the absence of international offices or structures to effectively and efficiently handle international students' admission and other concerns, there are many challenges facing them in Cameroon; some of which include securing housing, orientation and personal counselling, study permit application renewals and other documents.

Conclusion and recommendations

The opening up of Cameroonian universities to the outside world has been very slow given the enormous problems faced by the then lone University of Yaounde before 1993. However, specialized institutions or professional schools have since been admitting international students through diplomatic channels, especially from the Francophone neighbouring countries. The advent of the 1993 higher education reforms, which ushered in six state

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Caption for photo on back cover:

From left to right: Dr. Roshen Kishun (President of IEASA), Prof. Madoda Zibi (Vice-Rector Human Resources, Potchefstroom University), Ms. Betsie van der Elst, Dr. Essop Pahad, Minister in the Office of the State President and guest speaker at the official dinner, Mr. Satish Roopa, Executive Mayor of Potchefstroom and Prof. Jacques van der Elst, Head of the International Office of the Potchefstroom University/North-West University and chair of the Conference Organizing Committee. This photo was taken in front of the Banquet Hall where the festive conference dinner was held.